

YARRA GLEN & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

A0030684D

ABN 68 883 314 408



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

NEWSLETTER

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

FROM THE EDITOR

How time flies by when we are all busy making and living history as well as recording it. The Historical Society has now been lodged in our History Room for three years (aside from the current six months during renovations to the Hall). The Committee is looking forward to settling back in sometime in December. Providing a research service and mounting displays has been somewhat difficult with our resources in storage.

This month is also our third Tetlow Talk, now established as the major event in our calendar. This issue of the Newsletter provides a 'taster' for you – an article written by Barry Watts containing some anecdotes and observations about Melba, Furphy, Dennis and the Boyd family. His talk on 13 November however will have a much wider scope and will be well illustrated.

Helen

Historical Society Monthly Meetings

13 November 2011 –

General monthly meeting 1:30

....followed by the.....

Tetlow Talk 2:15 for 2:30 start

Guest speaker: Barry Watts

Topic : Notable artists and writers of the mid-Yarra Valley 1840-1965

Location: Uniting Church Hall, Corner of Kameel Drive & Melba Hwy, Yarra Glen [at the end of the service road in front of Melba Lodge]

11 December 2011 –

'Christmas Break-up'

Venue to be announced.

AT HOME IN THE YARRA VALLEY: *Melba, Furphy, Dennis and Boyd*

by Barry Watts

Melba Highway commences at Coldstream opposite the imposing gates of Coombe Cottage, once the home of Australia's world-renowned soprano Dame Nellie Melba (born Helen Porter Mitchell).

Melba's father, David Mitchell, a successful Melbourne builder and stonemason, owned the Cave Hill lime works at Lilydale and land at Steels Flat – on the Yarra River between Healesville and Woori Yallock near Killara – where the family spent their earliest holidays. He also later bought the original McPherson holding named 'Yarra Glen' near the Yering Gorge and, even later, the St Huberts vineyard property.

Melba's second brother Charlie, nine years her junior, lived in the district and, according to writer John Hetherington¹, 'had the priceless gift of playing jokes which deflated pompous people.' It was also said he could out drink 'any man within two hundred miles.' Melba tried to make allowances for his outrageous behaviour, but did not always succeed, as Hetherington reports:

Some years after building Coombe Cottage she installed a light on each of the two gateposts flanking the main entrance. Driving back after dark from a shooting expedition, Charlie Mitchell saw the two lighted globes and could not resist the temptation. He pulled up his car, got out a rifle, and shattered the globes with two well-aimed shots. Melba vowed she would never speak to him again, and even talked of suing him, but they were speaking again in a week or two and the threat of litigation was forgotten.²

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¹ Melbourne-born journalist and author.

² John Hetherington, *Melba, a biography*, London, Faber & Faber, 1967

Melba's grand-daughter Lady Pamela Vestey referred to Charlie Mitchell in her brief biography of Melba's father:

[David Mitchell] appointed his son, Charlie, as farm manager of Cave Hill, with many instructions and good advice. Charlie knew the country around Lilydale very well and had many friends there, which ensured that he was sometimes diverted from his duties. The driver on the train from Melbourne was one of his pals. It was arranged that when Mr Mitchell was a passenger, the driver would give several blasts on the whistle as they approached Cave Hill, giving Charlie time to get to work.³

Melba had many critics. She once complained to the editor of the Melbourne *Argus* that his paper hadn't mentioned her enough. 'I don't care what you say, for me or against me,' she railed, 'but for heaven's sake, say something about me.'



Melba at the Yarra Glen & Lilydale Hunt Club

She engaged a young Englishman, Beverley Nichols, to help prepare a book she was writing called *Melodies and memories*.⁴ Nichols travelled to Australia as Melba's secretary in 1924 and she 'decided that he was destined for a brilliant career and gave him introductions to help his social and literary ambitions... He spent some time at Coombe, bored and disgruntled and much disliked by the household.'⁵ Less than a year after Melba's death in 1932, Nichols released his own novel *Evensong* in which the central character appeared to be based on aspects of Melba's life. This action was 'indefensible' according to the now vocal *Argus*. Lady Vestey, writing nearly seventy years after the publication, showed greater restraint. '[Melba's] kindness was not well rewarded by Nichols. His book was less than flattering.'⁶

³ Pamela Vestey, *David Mitchell, a Forfar man, Coldstream, 1992*

⁴ Dame Nellie Melba, *Melodies and memories*, Melbourne, Nelson, 1925

⁵ Pamela Vestey, *Melba, a family memoir*, Melbourne, 1996

⁶ *Ibid*

During World War I Melba convinced Australian writers and artists to contribute to an anthology she sponsored to raise funds for Belgian refugees, copies of these are now collectors' items.⁷

The first township along Melba Highway is Yarra Glen with literary connections of its own. Joseph Furphy, who later wrote *Such is life* under the name 'Tom Collins', was born there on 26th September 1843, about two years after his parents had migrated from Northern Ireland to Port Phillip. Back then, Yarra Glen was known as Yarra Flats and its first white settlers were the Ryrie brothers who had arrived overland from New South Wales with stock just six years previously and established their vast property at Yering. Furphy senior was employed by the Ryries at their outstation on the west side of the river where the township of Yarra Glen now stands.



Joseph Furphy

A plaque marking the Furphy link was unveiled by author Vance Palmer at the Yarra Glen State School in September 1934. This recognition of Furphy was instigated by Kate Baker. The State Library of Victoria holds a box of deteriorating memorabilia relating to this ceremony – responses to invitations, photographs, commemorative verse, and tributes to Furphy. For many years this box rested on the high mantelpiece above the school's open fireplace (it was there during my schooldays in the 1940s). It was given to the State Library sometime before 1986 when the old school was demolished. (see also Healesville Guardian extract on p.6 >)

Precisely where in Yarra Flats Joseph Furphy was born is arguable. One local historian, Leigh Blackburn, wrote:

*It is said that...in a wattle and daub shack, which was on the site of the present Yarra Glen State School, Joseph Furphy was born.*⁸

⁷ *Melba's Gift Book of Australian art and literature*, edited by Franklin Pearson, Melbourne, George Robertson & Co. [1915]

⁸ G. Leigh Blackburn, *A history of Yarra Glen district*, 1968

Miles Franklin, author of *My brilliant career*, wrote a biography of Furphy in collaboration with Kate Baker.⁹ In this work she states that the ‘... Yarra Glen School was selected as being the nearest public building to Furphy’s birthplace, being some distance from the exact spot.’

Joseph Furphy himself contributed to the confusion. A fragment of a letter from Furphy to his mother is included in the Miles Franklin biography. It was probably written in 1889 (part of the date is missing) after Joseph’s first visit to Yarra Glen as an adult. The Furphy family had moved from Yarra Flats to Kangaroo Ground when Joseph was only seven years old (1850). In the letter he wrote:

*I send you samples of vegetation from the banks of the Yarra – I got part of them where our old garden joined the river, and part on the opposite bank. Everything seems just the same as 39 years ago, except that there is a little State School on the very spot where our house stood, and a small township extending across the Stockyard Hill, and a railway line crossing the river just below the same two lagoons on the Back Flat till the river wattles hide it from view, and a very small railway station between the house and the Back Flat (where I once got a fright with a snake in a turkey’s nest).*¹⁰

Miles Franklin added a footnote to the ‘little State School’ reference above which reads ‘This school was removed years ago’.

Local historians have speculated about Joseph’s Yarra Valley geography as revealed in this letter. Ultimately they conclude that Joseph was mistaken, at least in part, between his childhood recollections and what he saw a third of a century later. In the 1840s the track from Kangaroo Ground was the old coach road and the first view of the Yarra Valley was from the top of Breakneck. It has been suggested that in 1889 when Furphy reached the top of the escarpment and scanned the valley below he was instead crossing over Big Hill on a road that did not exist during his childhood because it was constructed in the mid-1870s. So, following the track down into the valley, his bearings were astray by the distance between King and Symond Streets (say 1½ kms). Expecting to see his old home, he came across a ‘little State School on the very spot where our house stood.’ Other arguments – relating to ‘where our old garden joined the river’ and ‘Stockyard Hill’ etc – are too detailed to be presented here, but support this hypothesis which Mick Woiwod and Eric Tetlow formulated several years ago (and with which I concur). After all, Joseph did write ‘Everything seems just the same..’ (my emphasis).

Other places – Kangaroo Ground, Kyneton, Shepparton, Hay, and Swanbourne (WA) can correctly lay some claim to Joseph Furphy, but none can challenge Yarra Glen’s right to be known as his birthplace.

I have been told that C.J.Dennis once tried to burn down the Yarra Flats Hotel because he had too many drinks on the tab there. It is true he used to indulge there regularly – a descendant of the publican has several original hand-written verses by Dennis to prove the association – but the arson accusation is probably make-believe. Dennis used to catch the train from the city and disembark at Yarra Glen for the long walk or horse-cab drive to Toolangi via Dixons Creek (after a quencher or two at the Yarra Flats Hotel). Yarra Glen’s connections with Dennis were detailed in the August 2010 issue of this *Newsletter*.

More recently the town has bathed in the glory bestowed on it by the distinguished Australian novelist Martin Boyd (1893-1972), author of twenty books (including, unusually, two autobiographies) during a writing career spanning forty years. Martin’s parents, Arthur Merric Boyd and Emma Minnie Boyd, purchased a farm at Yarra Glen hoping their eldest son Merric might become interested in working the land. The Boyds moved to the farm on River Road (now called Yarraview Road) in 1909, naming it “Tralee” after the birthplace of Martin’s grandfather Captain John Theodore Boyd.

Arthur and Emma Boyd included their children in their life-long artistic pursuits. Several of their landscape paintings of the farm and river at Yarra Glen now form part of the Bundanon Collection.¹¹ Their offspring each rose to eminence in their chosen fields: Merric as potter, Penleigh as painter, Martin the novelist, and Helen also a painter.

Emma Boyd (known as Minnie) painted a wide frieze around the dining room of “Tralee” depicting the four seasons, but, ‘[it] was painted out fifty years later by a farmer who then owned the house’.¹² The ‘Summer’ part of Minnie’s frieze was discovered and restored in the mid-1980s.

In *The art of the Boyds* authors Patricia Dobrez and Peter Herbst refer to Martin Boyd’s habit of using ‘personalities and localities from his own experience and reworking them as fictional characters and places’:

Real houses...have their equivalents in the novels. Tralee, where Martin spent part of his childhood with his brothers

⁹ Miles Franklin, *Joseph Furphy, the legend of a man and his book*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1944

¹⁰ Miles Franklin, *ibid*. This letter fragment is also reproduced in John Barnes, *The order of things*, Melbourne, OUP, 1990.

¹¹ Accepted by the Australian Government as part of the gift from Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan along with their adjoining properties on the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales

¹² Martin Boyd, *Days of my delight: an Anglo-Australian memoir*, Sydney, Landsdowne Press, 1965

*Merric and Penleigh, and sister Helen, is recreated as Crosspatrick...in The Montforts.*¹³

Such disguises were unnecessary in Boyd's autobiographies however:

As long as we were not out riding after dark we could do as we pleased...At Kincaig, a mile and a half away on the hill, lived a Scottish family who had been rich before the boom, and had laid out a beautiful garden around their house, with flights of cypress-planted steps and a long soft-carpeted avenue of pines...The Rosses were extraordinarily kind to me, and if I was bored at home I would ride off and spend a day with them, staying uninvited to all meals. From their terrace there was a view of eight miles across the valley to the hills of Lilydale, which were generally opalescent mauve and gold in the evening light.

Across the river were vineyards, planted in early Victorian days by a Swiss baron, where they made a good claret...Beyond the vineyards was Madame Melba's house, where she came back regularly from the homage of Europe to help her native land, but she was not given a free ticket to the Yarra Glen Agricultural Show lest the local bigwigs should be jealous.

I think I was happier at Yarra Glen than I have been at any other time in my life. The country was beautiful in itself and my imagination clothed it with poetic significance.

Martin Boyd also reflected on the English attitude to servants and thought it may have been the reason why his parents never felt quite at home in England:

My mother told me that once at Penleigh she found that a newspaper had been taken out before she had read it, and she sent for it. Lady Clifford, an English cousin who was with her said: 'Surely you wouldn't read a paper after the servants have had it?' This was very different from Yarra Glen, where one of our local country girls passing along the verandah to bed would call 'Good night all' through the window, and we called back cheerfully: 'Good night, Maggie'.

Interestingly, Madame Melba also makes a fleeting appearance in Martin Boyd's novel *Lucinda Brayford*. She had the 'loveliest voice in the world' and attended a garden party given by Lucinda's parents. 'Melba sang two or three songs, *Down in the forest*, Musetta's song from *La Boheme*, and finally *Home, Sweet Home*.'

Martin Boyd's love of the Yarra Valley emerges in this book as well. His heroine, just before moving to live overseas, suggested 'that she and Hugo [her husband] should take a picnic and drive off into the country for the day':

They drove out though Eltham up to the Christmas Hills, where they picnicked by the roadside...After luncheon they climbed the hill above the road. From its summit they had a view for many miles to the Black Spur and the mountains of Healesville, which were blue and gold and splashed with purple shadows...And nowhere as far as they could see was any sign of human life, except a thin

line of smoke which rose from the vine-covered cottage concealed below the hill.



Martin Boyd in Europe

Boyd came to be regarded here as an 'expatriate writer' and judged as being 'too English' in both his personal and professional style. Worse still, he became aware his reputation was being overshadowed by his nephews, Arthur and Robin Boyd. He returned to Australia in 1948 and purchased his grandparents' former home 'The Grange' which was falling into disrepair. His nephew Arthur Boyd and his family lived with him and painted murals on the walls. But in 1951 Martin returned to Europe where he remained, eventually selling 'The Grange' in 1953. Before sailing for England however he made a nostalgic return to the township he loved.

I went over to Yarra Glen to see two of the Ross family remaining at Kincaig...when I came to the last straight mile or two of road before crossing the river into the township, I felt as if I was returning to the true home of my spirit...the one place I felt a sense of belonging...

Kincaig had been burnt down for the second time, in the raging bushfires which broke out shortly before the war [1939]. The great avenue of pines had been destroyed...

From Kincaig, in a promontory of the hills, I could see two miles away on the riverbank the home of my schooldays. All the trees in the grazing land between the road and the house had been cut down. I did not know the present owners, so did not call there, but sat on the Kincaig veranda looking down like Moses at the promised land in which I might not dwell...

I departed from Kincaig not knowing that this was my last visit to Yarra Glen.

¹³ Patricia Dobrez & Peter Herbst, *The art of the Boyds: generations of artistic achievement*, Sydney, Bay Books, 1990

YG&DHS ANNUAL REPORT 2011

Resignation of Brenda Cawte

After 10 years as the President of the YGDHS Brenda Cawte resigned at the 2010 AGM to give more time to her other commitments. She kept a firm hand on our agendas but always kept us going with a cheery smile and a positive spin on everything.

The highlights of the last twelve months have been

- Our second Tetlow Talk, November 2010. Guest speaker was Deidre Hawkins of Kinglake
- Presentation of the Ahern Natural History Award in December 2010 (Presented to the graduating student of Yarra Glen Primary School who shows most interest and talent in the field of natural history). We continue to receive donations to this award.
- Publication of our first Calendar which has been very successful. It features black and white drawings of historical buildings of the district skillfully drawn by Gane Ahern. Gane is the brother of Leigh Ahern, a valued member of our Society who sadly died on Black Saturday.
- We have been able to take significant steps towards getting our collections properly stored and catalogued through being part of the pilot Cataloguing project being conducted by Museums Australia (Victoria) and Museum Victoria.
- We have continued to support the Steels Creek Project, which is a team of academics and others from ANU who are preparing a history of Steels Creek and studies of the impact of the Black Saturday fires on the community.
- *Too close to be pleasant: the First World War letters of George Benjamin Muir*, compiled by Kath Hercus and edited by Helen Mann was published in April. 50% of the proceeds of sales through the Society are being donated to YGDHS as payment for Helen's time and research.
- Representatives of the Historical Society have attended meetings of the Yarra Glen Township Group; meetings convened by Yarra Ranges Council for renovations to the Memorial Hall; and meetings conducted by Yarra Valley Railway to discuss the redevelopment of the Yarra Glen railway precinct.
- We had to pack and move our collection to storage and move the furniture out of our History Room while the Memorial Hall is being renovated. We hope to be able to move back to our Room in December to slightly larger premises (about 3

square metres), a fire proof wall between us and the kitchen, and new carpet. In the meantime our monthly meetings have been held at the Yarra Glen Living & Learning Centre.

- We set up a display in the local Post Office using one of the display cases that we obtained through the auspices of Megan Sheehy (Yarra Ranges Museum). The first display was of images and artefacts from the 'Back to Yarra Glen' 1959 for Australian Heritage Week in April. The second and current display shows the history of the Post Office buildings and services in Yarra Glen.
- The Society has been successful in obtaining a grant of \$7,500 through the PROV Local History Awards to develop an online historical encyclopaedia of Yarra Glen & district which will utilize social media to encourage participation and contributions from the community.
- In August we conducted an excursion for the second year in a row. This year we had a very interesting visit to the Cistercian Abbey at Tarrawarra .
- Guest speakers throughout the year included Harold Muir (March), Frank Orenshaw, (April), Mick Woiod (May & September)
- Yarra Valley Railway invited the Society to put up a display at the Yarra Valley Railway Festival 24-25 September
- The Society has also contributed to the *Face to Face* Exhibition, Yarra Ranges Regional Museum which will open in October.

HELEN MANN
Vice-President

Office Bearers 2010/2011

President:	no nominations
Vice Presidents:	Jill Sheffield, Helen Mann
Secretary:	Helen Mann
Treasurer:	Jill Sheffield
Committee:	Barry Smith, Jenny Smith, Barry Sheffield, Diane Roberts

Publications Officer

& Newsletter Editor: Helen Mann

Communications Officer: Barry Sheffield

Following Healesville Tennis Club's very successful ball in the Memorial Hall on Friday night of last week, on Saturday the secretary (Mr Gibbs) and Mr and Mrs Mullett and other members attended the opening by Mr Everard, MLA of Yarra Glen Tennis Club's new courts, which have been constructed at a cost of £400, and are a fine acquisition to this progressive township.

On Sunday last, Mr Wallace, head teacher of Yarra Glen State School, obligingly allowed visitors to inspect the Joseph Furphy (Tom Collins, author of "Such is Life", "Rigby's Romance", etc) memorial plaque, which was unveiled at a ceremony held in the school on September 29th, 1934. Furphy was born at Yering about 1843 and died in West Australia in 1913. His brother, John Furphy, had implement works at Shepparton. Besides the bronze memorial plaque, which hangs on the wall in a corner of the main classroom, Yarra Glen school has a handsome

inscribed box in which is treasured a set of Furphy's books, music, a photo, and interesting correspondence (including letters from well-known Australian authors) relating to the occasion when the plaque was unveiled. About 50 children attend the school, which because of its association with one of Australia's best loved old-time authors, instills literary culture in the minds of its pupils. Its horticultural attainments too, are of no mean order, for the school garden, with its many beautiful shrubs and blooms, and its well-kept pathways, must be one of the choicest in the State.

Popular Yarra Glen identities who do much to promote the interests of their thriving little town include Messrs John Walker (Progress Association president), Bone (secretary), Newman and Weller. The local branch of the Country Women's Association has a keen membership.

Yarra Glen RSL Interests are staunchly championed by Mr Pat Kelly, local branch president.

2011/2012 Membership fees now due (*please disregard if paid*)

This is a reminder to those who may have overlooked the fact that membership fees were due as of the Annual General Meeting (9 October 2011).

Financial members and affiliated societies/organizations will continue to receive the Newsletter.

Single membership \$12

Family \$16 (*two adults living at same address*)

Distant member \$10 (*lives too far away to regularly attend meetings/functions of the Society*)