

# CAMBERWELL HISTORY

RECORDING THE HISTORY OF CAMBERWELL  
AND DISTRICT

Camberwell Historical Society



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**Principal Patron:** Professor Emeritus Geoffrey Blainey, AC

**Patron:** Her Worship the Mayor of Boroondara, Cr Coral Ross

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Our Society has had a very successful year with interesting excursions and informative speakers adding to our knowledge of history. Memorable events of the year included our visit to Bolobek, one of Australia's finest historic gardens, located in Mt. Macedon. Photojournalist Bruce Postle delighted us with many of his most famous photographs. His presentation covered over 50 years of history through photography. The year ended with Anne Barton speaking to us about her great-grandfather Sir Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister. She spoke passionately about Barton's life and his leading role in the drive for Federation. We were honoured by the attendance of Judith Harley, the granddaughter of the second Prime Minister of Australia, Alfred Deakin. She read to us a personal letter from Sir Edmund Barton to Alfred Deakin.

April 2015 marks the 100th Anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli. Thus our Society begins the year in February with the chairman of the Victorian Anzac Centenary Committee, the Hon. Ted Baillieu, speaking about the commemorations of Victoria's involvement in and contribution to World War I.

I wish you a happy Christmas and look forward to seeing you all next year.

George Fernando

## THE SECRET LOVE LETTERS: A FAMILY HISTORY

### Dolores San Miguel

In her book, *The Secret Love Letters: A Family History*, Dolores delves into the history of her Spanish ancestors, the once-illustrious San MIGUELS, and uncovers the forbidden love affair that tore the family apart. Fay Johnston told her daughter of a collection of letters she had kept hidden away for over 60 years, promising to show them to her when the time was right. It was only after her mother died that Dolores found the letters, concealed beneath a large piece of wood deep within a storage cupboard. Through endless research and close analysis, Dolores pieced together nearly a hundred letters, newspaper ads, doctors' notes, and postcards to unravel the story of her parents' romance, kept secret for over two decades.

Dolores San Miguel places her own family saga in the wider context of early European immigration to Australia, as well as offering a fascinating glimpse into Melbourne life in the lead-up to World War II.

When Jaime San Miguel met Fay Johnston in 1932 he was living in a large home at 18 Stodart Street, Camberwell. Fay was living with her family at 123 Tooronga Road, Malvern. It was the beginning of a passionate, yet forbidden love affair that sent both families into chaos.

In these extracts from my book, I give an insight into how my Irish maternal ancestors came to reside in Melbourne. I also give the history of my Spanish paternal grandfather's arrival in Australia.

Florence Annie Johnston was born at home on 6 October 1909 at 46 Birkenhead Street, North Fitzroy, Melbourne. She was the second daughter of William Patterson Johnston who came from a staunch, Protestant Irish background and Annie Johnston (née O'Halloran) from a Catholic Irish one. Annie's mother, Brigid O'Halloran (née Hession) was born in Galway, Ireland in 1845. In June 1862, aged seventeen, she left Southampton on board the *Boanerges* bound for Melbourne, although she took residence in the country area of Wangaratta. She married Thomas O'Halloran on 5 September 1873, and they moved to Beechworth in the northeast of Victoria. Thomas was born in Kilkenny, Ireland in 1839, and at age twenty-five he left Liverpool on board the *Royal Dane*, heading for Melbourne. Brigid and Thomas had seven children between 1874 and 1881: Mary, Thomas Jr., Michael, Catherine (Kate), Nell, Annie, and Brigid.

Annie married William Johnston and began a family with the birth of Henry (Harry) in 1906, followed by Dorothy in 1908, then Florence, Arthur (1913), and Lillian (1914). They soon moved to a larger home at 215 Holden Street, Fitzroy.



The family managed to get by on William's mediocre salary as an insurance clerk; however, he had an eye for a pretty face, drank far too much, and loved to gamble. William's father, George Johnston, was born in the County of Fermanagh, (Northern) Ireland, in 1831, and after meeting an English girl, Annie Hill, they migrated to Australia in 1862. George then worked as a warden at Pentridge Gaol; it was here he gained a reputation as a cruel and vicious man. Many a prisoner was beaten during his violent outbursts. A crack shot with a rifle, George won trophies for his expertise and was present at the execution of Ned Kelly. The family had lodgings at Pentridge, and it was here that all the children (apart from Margaret Matilda, born in Ireland in 1859) were born. George Johnston died at the age of forty-seven years on 19 February 1885, five years after the death of Ned Kelly. It was a relief for seventeen-year-old William, who also received beatings from his father, the memory of which would lead to him finding solace in whisky.

William Johnston and family 1916

William's drinking and gambling increased after two major tragedies. On 3 January 1911, little three-year-old Dorothy died of pneumonia after a nasty bout of whooping cough. Then, on 3 December 1915, two-year-old Arthur died after contracting diphtheria. During this time diphtheria killed more Australians than any other disease. Although Florence was only six when her baby brother died, she had vivid memories of visiting him in the hospital. He was under quarantine, so she could only wave to him through the large glass doors. When she learnt that Arthur was not coming home, she cried in her bed every night for a month. Her parents were devastated, and not long afterwards their arguing escalated. The two deaths caused a rift between Annie and William that only increased as the years rolled by.

Regardless of their problems, William became a top salesman with AMP Insurance; however, he eventually blotted his copybook with an unethical transaction and lost his permanency. After this he had to rely on commissions, and it was around this time that he became an illegal S.P. bookie. Very early on, Annie began to take wads of cash out of his winnings when he was too drunk to realize. She opened a new bank account and watched as the balance rose, along with the interest. She had to plan for the future, especially when she learnt that William had a mistress. She turned a blind eye to the affair—at least she didn't have to succumb to her marital duties as often—so, in a way, it was a relief, and she kept the secret to herself for twenty odd years. She confronted the woman when she turned up at William's funeral. He had died on New Year's Day in 1938, and no one in the family enjoyed New Year's Eve after that, especially Florence, who had adored her father.

By her early teens, Florence had asked to be called Fay. Florence, she had stated, was far too old-fashioned and staid. She attended the local, Catholic school, although Harry was back and forth between Protestant and Catholic schools. William wanted his eldest son to be bought up just like him, and yet Annie disagreed, hence the juggling of schools. In the end, Harry made the decision to be Protestant, so William won out after all.

Although Lillian was five years younger than Fay, they were always very close. Even though she didn't remember her older sister Dorothy, as she was only two years old when Dorothy died, it did make Fay feel a sense of loyalty to Lillian, the remaining sister. Lillian was extremely shy in comparison to Fay and Harry. Their mother took advantage of this, persuading Lillian to remain at home with her after she left school. Fay, on the other hand, was extremely ambitious and started a course at a secretarial business college. She excelled in Pitman's shorthand and her typing skills were first-rate. Lillian, contrastingly, grew skilled in cookery, sewing, and domestic duties.

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In late August of 1870, nineteen-year-old Antonio San Miguel, the dark, broad-shouldered, handsome second son of successful Catalan wine grower Cipriano San Miguel and wife Francisca (née Mirambel), of Alella, Spain, set off from their homeland in a spirit of adventure to seek their fortune in Australia. Besides his parents, Antonio left behind his twenty-two-year old brother, Francisco, and sisters Carmen, twenty-seven, and Maria, twenty-five, who were both married.<sup>1</sup> He carried a 'Passport for Abroad', an identity card which gave him the right to travel to France and overseas as a Spanish citizen. Close friends of the San MIGUELS, the Parer family, also from Alella, had arrived in Australia in 1858 and had a number of prosperous

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<sup>1</sup> Cipriano and Francisca San Miguel's firstborn daughter, Carmen, was stillborn in 1841. They also christened their second daughter Carmen, who was born two years later. Salvadora Casilda Teresa, born in 1854, and Jose Jaime Benito, born in 1856, both died in infancy.

restaurants, hotels, and catering establishments. So this optimistic and confident young man was determined to succeed.

Antonio arrived in Paris en route to England shortly after the commencement of the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>2</sup> He heard that the Prussian troops were about to cut off each railway line out of the city and realizing the danger he was in, made a desperate dash to the Gare du Nord train station where he caught the last train out before the siege of Paris on 19 September. It was a story he often related over the years. He arrived in Calais and boarded a ship bound for Australia, arriving in Sydney late November 1870. He took lodgings at an inner city hotel. With the money he had saved working for his father and the money his family had given him, he would be comfortable for a suitable amount of time. Antonio eventually moved in with a Catalan family, whose son was a good friend of his. He had plans to import his father's wine products, plus other ideas that came to him as he toured around Sydney. An economic boom was just beginning in Australia and young Antonio was extremely optimistic. He soon had interests in a number of billiard parlours, and began importing and selling Alella wine.

Around 1876 Antonio had become very close friends with two brothers, Andres and Joaquin Mauri who had come from the southern province of Andalusia, Spain, a year before. The brothers had experience in the cork industry and by early 1877 had begun a partnership in Sydney called Mauri Brothers. They traded as cork merchants and importers with their headquarters in Seville. On 12 September 1877, Antonio acquired a publican's licence for the Australian Hotel in Druiitt Street Sydney, taking over from Antonio Plannis. He continued importing wines and later spirits; soon, his hotel (which also had lodgings available for rent) became a very successful establishment. In 1882 he transferred his licence to Joseph Gilnot and left Australia to visit his family in early 1883. He remained in Spain for a number of months before returning to Australia to settle down.

On 20 June 1884, Antonio acquired a large interest and the proprietorship of The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel Company at 393 George Street, Sydney. His good friend, Martin Arenas became a partner. Martin was a cousin-in-law of the Parers and also a relative of the San Miguels through marriage, and had lent him money back in 1877 to take over the Australian Hotel.<sup>3</sup> The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel had originally opened on the 2 October 1879 as a temperance hotel. The idea was not to serve alcohol and create a sober environment for their upper-crust clients. This movement failed and when Antonio took over, he applied for a publican's licence to continue his importation and selling of wines and spirits.

Antonio regularly dined in the ground floor saloon and one evening in 1885 he noticed a large family enjoying the cuisine. His gaze fell on one of the daughters, twenty-year-old Rebecca (Birdie) Albon. Glistening fair hair, azure blue eyes and an English rose complexion, Antonio

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<sup>2</sup> The Franco-Prussian war (19/07/1870-10/05/1871) was a conflict between France and Prussia that signalled the rise of German military power and imperialism. It was provoked by Otto von Bismark (the Prussian chancellor) as part of his plan to create a unified German Empire.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Arenas was declared bankrupt in Sydney in 1894. He was married with three children, although the youngest, Arthur, died aged two in 1892. In September of 1902 the family moved to Melbourne and in 1908 Arenas became the licensee of the Kennedy's Family Hotel in Elizabeth Street, remembered as a "gloomy hotel". It is highly likely Antonio would have financially helped Martin out. On April 4th 1892, a John Powell was arrested for larceny of some dress clothes belonging to James Gray and W. Nicholson, taken from The Sydney Coffee Palace in 1891. The accused stated the clothing had been given to him by Charles Marlett and Martin Arenas at the Coffee Palace. The clothing answered the description given by the Sydney police and John Powell was remanded in Sydney. The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel at 393 George Street, Sydney has gone; however, next to the current building is Temperance Lane. Number 395 is still the original building and is now a clothing store.

was mesmerized by her beauty. He made his way over to their table to make his acquaintance and inquire if everything was to their satisfaction. Twenty-year-old Birdie, as she was affectionately called, blushed when her eyes met the striking Spaniard. At the table that night, Antonio met her parents, James and Rebecca Albon (née Poulter), and her siblings: twenty-two-year-old Grace, teenagers Jesse, Annie, and Maud, and little nine-year-old Geseyne.

Originally from Bedfordshire, England, and having lived at Lambeth and Surrey, the family and their eighteen-year-old servant girl, Harriet, had arrived from Plymouth, England on the ship the *Pericles*, on 5 December 1877. Birdie's father James Albon was a successful builder, plumber and home decorator, skills he had learned from his own father. Birdie's other brother James Jr, had returned to England after a short stay in Australia.<sup>4</sup> John, the first-born son, had died at around nine years of age. The remaining children, Jane (known as Jenny) and Thomas, had both recently married and remained in England.<sup>5</sup> The youngest, Geseyne, was not blood related, and had been adopted as an infant when her birth parents, friends of the Albons, tragically died. They now lived at Glebe Point, Sydney, where James Albon carried on his profitable business.

By 1887, Antonio had become involved in some areas of the Mauri Brothers importing company, and had also become interested in the cork importing side of their business. When he and Birdie married on 20 March 1888 at St Patrick's Church, Church Hill, Sydney by the Reverend Father Piquet, Andres Mauri was best man. Birdie had embraced Antonio's religion and became a convert to the Roman Catholic Church prior to the wedding.

On 2 February, two months before his wedding, Antonio dissolved his partnership with Martin Arenas by mutual consent, and Arenas took over the business of the Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel. Shortly after their wedding, Antonio and Birdie set off on a honeymoon, travelling on the steam ship *Zealandia* to the USA, Europe and England. They were away for nineteen months and during this time Birdie fell pregnant. After a sojourn in Paris, they went to Marseilles where they caught the French ship *Yarra* to head back to Australia. On board ship Birdie gave birth to their first born, a son, Antonio (Tony) Stanley Joaquin (after good friend Joaquin Mauri) who was also on board; they landed in Sydney on 12 November 1889.

Over the next two years, Antonio made several trips to Melbourne and in 1892, the family moved to Melbourne, Victoria. He then set up the company, A. San Miguel and Company Cork Merchants and Importers in McKillop Street, Melbourne. Antonio and Birdie had five more children, Francisca, born in 1893, Ines, 1895, Lionel, 1896, Jaime, 1898, and Patricia, born in Seville, in 1900. After a three-year hiatus in Spain the family rented a grand, two-storey Victorian mansion, Hartland, in Elmie Street, Auburn, Melbourne in 1903. They remained there until Antonio purchased a 3.5 acre property, St Abbs, in York Street, Mont Albert in 1906.

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<sup>4</sup>James Albon Jr returned to England around 1878, and in 1880 married Sarah Ann Mead. They had four children—James, Jessie, Stanley and Olive—and emigrated to Australia, arriving on board the *Orotavia* on 19 July 1890.

<sup>5</sup> Jane (Jenny) Albon married John Moss, a widower, in 1878. She was 23 years old and he was 60. Her baby son, John Albon Moss was born in 1879. In 1880, she died aged 25, cause of death unknown; however, it's possible she may have died during childbirth and lost the baby. Her son was only a year old when she passed away, and her husband married for the third time not long after her death. His new wife, Charlotte, raised the baby boy. John Albon Moss died in 1918 at 39 - it is possible he died in World War 1.



San Miguel Family - Great Grandpa and Grannie, my grandfather Tony and siblings.

After my Mother, Faye Johnston, died, I was too distraught to even consider looking at the love letters. It was 6 months after the release of my first book that I finally sat down and started reading them. Once I had read them all and put them in sequence, I realized what an intriguing love story it was. When I began the research of their individual family history, it was obvious that both families had a fascinating background. I also discovered a few more scandals within the family!

My parents came from very different backgrounds, and it soon became obvious that their forbidden romance was not only frowned upon by religious rules and wowsers, but by the manipulation of old money. Writing their life stories and incorporating the surreptitious letters also gave me an insight into life leading up to and after World War 11.

Although I never met my Uncle Lionel San Miguel (I was nearly nine when he died suddenly and unexpectedly on the 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1959) I knew that he was a renowned architect, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1920s he designed a residence in Canterbury, Melbourne, called Montalegre, in the Mediterranean style for his mother, Rebecca San Miguel. He also designed a Spanish Mission style home for his wife and two children at 7 Bowley Avenue, Balwyn.

Other buildings he designed included a single-story hall at Genezzano College in Kew, an Art Deco building for the Town Auto Wholesalers at 111-125 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne, and the Advocate Press Building at 99 A'Beckett Street, a year later in 1937. Lionel also designed the Sacred Heart Hospital, Moreland (1938) Sacred Heart Monastery in Croydon, completed in 1939. Between 1951-'52 he worked on the Monivae College in Hamilton, and then the Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church, in Deepdene, Melbourne, completed in 1955. When Archbishop Daniel Mannix consecrated the church in 1955, he praised the beauty of the building saying that,

*For many generations this church built by Father Godwin and his people will stand, I think, almost unrivalled in its beauty and perfection.*

Extracts from the book, "The Secret Love Letters; A Family History", by Dolores San Miguel.

Published by [www.melbournebooks.com.au](http://www.melbournebooks.com.au) and available at both Readings and Dymocks book shops. It is also available as an eBook at:

[http://www.amazon.com/Secret-Love-Letters-Family-History-ebook/dp/B00OULAJQA/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1414883369&sr=1-1&keywords=secret+love+letters](http://www.amazon.com/Secret-Love-Letters-Family-History-ebook/dp/B00OULAJQA/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1414883369&sr=1-1&keywords=secret+love+letters)

## MEETING REPORTS 2014

### September 23 **Jane Nigro, "The History of Malvern"**

Jane Nigro from the Malvern Historical Society gave a most informative presentation, including photographs, covering the City of Stonnington, which was formed by the joining of Prahran and Malvern in 1994. Jane traced the early settlement of the area on land that had belonged to the Wurundjeri people. By 1839, John Gardiner and James McAlpine were running cattle on the land. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there had been substantial residential and commercial development and the area became and remains affluent. Jane took us on a virtual tour of the area, following the main roads and noting relevant buildings and other structures, and public gardens along the way.

### October 12 **Excursion to the 19th Century Portable Iron Houses, South Melbourne**

A special viewing was arranged for CHS members and friends to view these rare examples of early property development in Melbourne. These houses are among the few prefabricated iron buildings remaining in the world. The National Trust looks after and conducts the tours of these houses.

### November 25 **Anne Barton "Edmund Barton: the one man for the job"**

Anne has researched the life of Sir Edmund Barton, her great-grandfather. He was a major contributor to the Federation movement through the 1890s and served as the first Prime Minister of Australia. He became a founding justice of the High Court of Australia in 1903. Anne gave us a great insight into the development of the Federation movement and the key roles played by Sir Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin, the second Prime Minister of Australia. Her presentation was enhanced by images of historic photographs of significant moments in the story of Federation.



National Trust Iron House, South Melbourne

Judith Harley, granddaughter of Alfred Deakin, Prof.  
Don Garden, President Royal Historical Society of  
Victoria and Anne Barton, great-granddaughter of Sir  
Edmund Barton

## MEETINGS FOR 2015

All meetings will be held on the fourth Tuesday of each alternate month in the Meeting Room, Camberwell Library, 340 Camberwell Road, Camberwell at 8.00pm.

February 24th 8pm Ted Baillieu Victoria's WWI Commemorations  
March 24th 8pm Ken James William Swan Urquhart, Surveyor

## CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY - DONATIONS TO THE COLLECTION

Surrey Hills Neighbourhood Centre has donated "The story of First Camberwell Central (Melba's own) Scout Group."

Brad and Kath Joyner have donated a framed real estate advertisement of Glen Iris Heights.

Jane Nigro donated 5 publications from Malvern Historical Society.

Contributions to *Camberwell History* contain the opinions of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Camberwell Historical Society, its committee or members.

## SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE

Reminder that the Society's financial year operates from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> June and subscriptions are due and payable on or before July 1<sup>st</sup> each year. Thank you to the members who have already paid their membership fees.

## CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC

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*Camberwell History*: Editor — Adèle Fernando-Swart

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