

# CAMBERWELL HISTORY

RECORDING THE HISTORY OF CAMBERWELL  
AND DISTRICT

Camberwell Historical Society



No. 33

June 2018

ISSN 1838-0875 / ISSN 2208-1828 (Online)

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

**Patron:** His Worship the Mayor of Boroondara, Cr Jim Parke

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**George Fernando**

We were very privileged to hear the presentations made by our last three speakers: Dr Ross McMullin, John Maidment OAM and Dr Brenda Niall. They spoke to large audiences, who were highly appreciative.

A visit to Government House and La Trobe Cottage has been booked for Monday 24 September 10am start. Photo ID is needed for this tour and bookings and payment must be received by 3 September.

Since the last newsletter, Camberwell Historical Society has welcomed four new members: Victor Franco, Siobhan Barker, Sonia Miles Khan and Suzanne Chapman.

**Please note the change of location, dates and times for the June and July meetings. These can be found on the back cover of this newsletter.**



## SILENT MOVIES, SILENT MAN:

**Andre de Beranger: Australia's forgotten silent film star**

**Bryony Cosgrove**

Several years ago, I made an intriguing discovery in the midst of renovations in our Camberwell home; shoved to the back of a wardrobe I found a top hat and cane, which had belonged to my husband Philip Heath's great uncle, Australian-born silent film actor George Beringer. I was fascinated, but why had I never heard of him?

Known in Hollywood as Andre de Beranger, George reached the height of his fame in the 1920s (left: Beranger with Lilyan Tashman in *So This is Paris*). He acted in and directed dozens of movies in the United States, England and Europe, and won a

Variety Award (forerunners to the Academy Awards) for his role as a hitman in the 1916 film *Flirting With Fate*. Today he is almost unknown, lucky to rate even a footnote in the golden days of silent film. George's career fizzled with the coming of sound in 1927. Like so many others in the film industry, he wasn't given the second chance at fame offered to George Valentin in the recent movie *The Artist*.

Yet George was an intriguing character, his own life every bit the stuff of Hollywood movies. I decided to go in search of him, through archives and across the United States. If he was without a voice he was not without a presence.

Like many other actors, George reinvented himself in Hollywood, claiming French parentage, birth on a French ocean liner off the coast of Australia, and a Paris education. Perhaps he also spoke fluent French, although the lack of an authentic accent would not have mattered in silent film. He perfected the role of foppish Frenchman in at least a dozen films, including *If I Were Single*, *Beware of Bachelors* and his big hit *So This is Paris*, Ernst Lubitsch's satirical take on Rudolph Valentino and the 'sheik fever' of the time, in which George played 'exotic dancer' Maurice Lallé, opposite Lilyan Tashman.

His real beginnings were a little less exotic. George was born in a small terrace house on Sarah Street in Enmore, Sydney, in 1893, the youngest of five sons of Adam Beringer, a German migrant engine fitter. Tragically, George's mother Caroline Matilda committed suicide when he was 3. His father remarried, several years later, however the boys' stepmother turned them out of the house when they reached the age of 14.



The accepted family story about George was that he wanted to be in movies, and headed to Hollywood as a young man. Yet the film industry was barely established in California at that time, making it more likely the lure of the stage took George overseas. He had been a member of the Walter Bentley Shakespeare Players in Sydney, and had also attended the college of Elocution and Dramatic Art run by the Scottish-born Bentley. In July 1912, George took a steamship from Sydney to Vancouver, where Bentley was on tour. Several months later, George was photographed with stage and screen actor Donald Crisp in Union Square, New York (George on the left), then the city's theatre district and close to D.W. Griffith's Biograph studios on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. George had entered the United States illegally, probably crossing the border from Toronto without official papers. His film career was underway.

In 1913, he acted in five Biograph films, which seems like a promising start until compared with co-star Lionel Barrymore's 45 roles for the same year. Early silent films were short and could be shot in less than a week. The actors, many of whom initially regarded film as merely a

way of earning money between theatre engagements, were versatile and self-sufficient, often wearing their own clothes on set and doing their own makeup. George's top hat and cane appear



in several of his films. Some actors also did a bit of scriptwriting and directing. George both played the part of young Southerner Duke Cameron (left) in D.W. Griffith's civil war blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation*, and was an assistant director on the film.

War broke out several weeks after Griffith began shooting in July 1914. Studios began to shut all over Europe and Great Britain, allowing Hollywood to become the dominant industry player. By the time the United States entered the war in 1917, George was giving some thought to a military service record: he claimed to have joined the Australian Army as well as the Royal Flying Corp's crack Squadron 85, members of which included flying ace Billy Bishop and the author of the *Biggles* books Captain W.E. Johns. None of this can be verified officially, but it must have given the impression that George was playing his part. Much of his life was a

tangled blend of fact and fiction.

The 1920s were George's heyday, both personally and professionally. He built a grand Spanish mission-style house on a large block of land overlooking the ocean at Laguna Beach, south of Los Angeles. He also retained a room at the Hollywood Athletic Club on Sunset Boulevard, commuting between the two in his snazzy Kissel roadster (below).

Ocean cruising was a popular pastime, and George made several trips to England and France, where he maintained a Paris apartment for a few years. He also returned to Sydney briefly, in 1928, to visit his family.

George acted in almost 40 films during the 1920s, covering adventure, historical romance, mystery and comedy. He was in Roland West's early 'Batman' film, being stalked by a jewel thief wearing what looks like a brush-tail possum suit. And he played pirates, soldiers, crooks and European noblemen. But comedy was his forte, particularly the role of ardent but unlikely lover. George never got the girl, even when cavorting semi-naked in *Beware of Bachelors* (right).

He continued to work with D.W. Griffith, even though the director had lost sight of the future of film, preferring to believe pictures were the universal means of communicating and that sound was just a passing fad.



Griffith had even sacked Al Jolson in 1923, claiming he lacked screen appeal; in 1927 Jolson spoke and then burst into song in *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length film with synchronized dialogue.

When the Great Depression hit Hollywood in 1930, efficiency experts were brought in by studios. Non-contract actors such as George were the first to be let go. Eventually, he was forced to sell the Laguna Beach house and move into a small cottage on a corner of the original block of land. In an attempt to maintain appearances and preserve his dwindling box office appeal as a comic romantic lead, George contracted what was known in Hollywood as a 'lavender marriage' to a neighbouring widow. The couple never shared a house, and George continued to live a bachelor life.

He acted in films through the 1930s and 1940s, although ironically, in the era of sound, his very minor roles were uncredited and often non-speaking. To make do, he worked as a draftsman for the Los Angeles city council, staying at the Hollywood Athletic Club during the week. He had built up an impressive collection of silent films during his years in the industry, and liked to screen them, often for friends and fellow actors, in his room at the club, recalling an earlier time of innovation and artistry.

A recluse at the time of his death in 1973, George was found in his Laguna Beach shack, behind locked gates and high walls. He had been dead for several days before a postman noticed mail spilling from the letterbox, and called the police. George's body was surrounded by press cuttings, photographs, films and costumes – mementoes of a career long gone and mostly forgotten. Much of this was packed into trunks and sent to his relatives in Australia.

George and his career was the subject of my MA thesis, and I am now in the process of developing this study into a full biography.

## FROM OUR ARCHIVES

### The Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club

#### Bryony Cosgrove



The Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club is a rarity in that it remains the only bowling club founded in Victoria to be administered by and for ladies. In September 1960, Mrs Dorothy McCutcheon, a vice-president of the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association, and herself a prominent bowler, saw the need for the founding of an all-ladies bowling club to make it possible for more women to play bowls. The Camberwell City Council was approached for a suitable site and for financial assistance. With the approval of the Metropolitan Board of Works, occupancy of a site in Lynden Park was granted by the Council, along with an interest-free loan of eight thousand pounds.

A public meeting was held on 25 May 1961 at the Camberwell Town Hall, chaired by the Mayor, Councillor Reginald G. Cooper. The Camberwell District Ladies'

Bowling Club was formed and was affiliated with the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association. Lady Flora Cameron was elected inaugural President.

On the site granted by the Council two greens were erected, separated from each other by a beautiful wall of Lilydale stone, an attractive garden and a pavilion. Many donations were received and various functions such as card afternoons and evenings, morning coffees, a mannequin parade and Tupperware parties, and bowls lessons, were held prior to the laying of the greens and the erections of the club house. Mr Bill Isbister taught the rules of bowls, etiquette of bowls and how to hold and deliver a bowling ball. The lessons were given in the RSL Hall in Camberwell before the opening of the greens. A high cyclone fence was erected around the greens, and a gardening committee was formed to dig and plant flower beds. A piano was purchased for use in the club rooms.

The top east green was declared open on 22 September 1962 by Mrs Elva Bloomfield, President of the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association. Mrs Bloomfield also delivered to first bowl. Councillor W. A. Fordham senior unfurled the club flag. Councillor R. G. Cooper cut the ribbons across the door to the club house to officially open the club, and the Mayor Councillor Ralph Dear then unveiled the portrait of the Queen and proposed the loyal toast. Councillor Wallace Fordham unveiled the Club Honour Board.

The lower west green was opened on 9 March 1963 by Mrs Myrtle Hamilton, President of the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association. On 15 May 1963 Lady Flora Cameron, the provisional and foundation president, having supported and helped the club to become established, returned to her original club, Willison, but remained the patroness of Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club. It was her wish a competition be held each year between Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club and Willison Ladies' Bowling Club – to be called The Cameron Bowl. This competition has formed a friendship between the two clubs over the years.

On 5 September 1964, Mrs Myrtle Hamilton, State President of the Victorian Ladies' Bowling Association, declared the greens open for the season. The top east green was named the Cooper Green and the lower west green the Fordham Green by Mrs Rose Cooper in honour of Councillors R. G. Cooper and W. A. Fordham who both gave valuable help during the formation of the club.







Various items and fittings have been donated to the club over the years, including a painting by Mr J. Roach of a linden tree, which hangs on the wall of the pavilion. The club badge, a linden tree, was also designed by Mr Roach. A beautiful luncheon cloth, embroidered in the club colours and incorporating the linden tree, was made and presented to the club by Mrs Beryl Carter to be used on special occasions.

The club has survived droughts and water rationing over the years, and at least one violent storm in February 1979, during which the roof was blown off the clubhouse. A temporary canvas roof was erected, and fortunately the club was able to continue as one of the hosts of the Australian Women's Bowling Carnival.

The club became incorporated in September 1985 and was renamed the Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club Incorporated, and the following year, in February 1986, the club held a twenty-five-year celebration at which past and present members were welcomed. The club consists entirely of women, apart from the male greenkeeper employed there, and it has been run and maintained by women since its inception. The beautiful greens, the pavilion and surroundings are a monument to the enterprise of the founder, Mrs Dorothy McCutcheon, and her committee and the women bowlers of the Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club Incorporated.

(Summarised from The History of the Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club Incorporated 1961-1986)

## **VALE**

CHS member John Alan Gilbert, 1944 – 2018, passed away 17 April.

## **CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY DONATION RECEIVED FOR THE COLLECTION**

School photographs, a cd and recipe books from Camberwell Girls Secondary School donated by Mrs Laurie Newton.

## **CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY SUBSCRIPTIONS RENEWALS 2018**

Camberwell Historical Society's financial year operates from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> June. Subscriptions are due and payable on or before July 1<sup>st</sup> 2018.

## REPORT OF CHS VISIT TO CAMBERWELL GRAMMAR GRADE 3

George Fernando



George Fernando and Bill Mackie visited Camberwell Grammar School, where the Grade 3 class is studying local history. Bill Mackie made a presentation to the class about the history of the area near the school between Mont Albert Road and Whitehorse Road. Bill talked about Robert Reid MLA, the Reid family and their many houses built on the original Belmont property. Mary Reid gifted Belmont Park, to the east of

Camberwell Grammar, to the Camberwell Council as a park in 1913. Information about the various Reid houses featured in the March 2018 newsletter. The boys asked many questions about what life was like in the early twentieth century.

## REPORT OF MEETINGS 2018

**Dr Ross McMullin - *Pompey Elliott at War: In His Own Words*  
27 March 2018**

Dr Ross McMullin completed law and commerce degrees at the University of Melbourne and practised briefly as a solicitor. He worked for the Australian Archives for two years and since then has been an historian and writer. Dr McMullin has written extensively about Australia's involvement in World War I. His book *Will Dyson: Australia's Radical Genius* was shortlisted for The Age Book of the Year Award. (Will Dyson was Australia's first war artist). His biography of Pompey Elliott was awarded the Christina Stead Award for biography and the Melbourne University Press Award for literature. The multiple biography *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation* was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History and the National Cultural Award.

This book, *Pompey Elliott at War: In His Own Words*, is not a biography of Pompey Elliott, as this book reflects Pompey Elliott's experience of war in his own words as written to his wife, his children, in personal letters, in despatches, in recommendations for awards and in his diaries. Pompey's letters and diaries were extraordinarily frank, forthright, emotional and controversial. The book is as he wrote - candid, vivid and riveting, with a marvellous turn of phrase. His emotions are starkly evident in his writing about his wartime experiences. He once wrote such a frank and forthright battle report that all copies were ordered to be destroyed.

Pompey Elliott was Australia's most famous fighting general in World War I. He was an accomplished tactician and dynamic leader, who would go himself to see the conditions and terrain. He was a legendary commander whose brilliant and vigorous leadership was crucial in iconic Australian triumphs such as Villers-Bretonneux and Polygon Wood. He lost many men in the Gallipoli landing. His brigade was at Fromelles, where he lost many men and officers. His experiences at war affected him deeply and his letters reflect his feelings and melancholy. He was not promoted to divisional command, probably because he was too outspoken.

Pompey Elliott cared deeply about his men. It has been said of Elliott that he could do some things with Australian troops no other commander could do. Elliott knew it and was humble about it. After the Polygon Wood battle he wrote to his wife:

'It is all due to the boys and the officers like Norman Marshall ... It is wonderful the loyalty and bravery that is shown, their absolute confidence in me is touching—I can order them to take on the most hopeless looking jobs and they throw their hearts and souls not to speak of their lives and bodies into the job without thought. You must pray more than ever that I shall be worthy of this trust, Katie, and have wisdom and courage given me worthy of my job'.

He and his wife were apart for five years. He wrote prolifically and very affectionately to her and to his children, even turning the Western Front into a bedtime story!

After the final parade, where he made a very emotional speech asking the men to have faith in themselves and in Australia, the troops spontaneously gave Pompey Elliott a march past and salute as a demonstration of respect.



Above: Jan Dimmick, Dr Ross McMullin, Graham Williams and Ian Douglas



**John Maidment OAM - *Lost Pipe Organs of Australia*  
10 April 2018**

John Maidment was a co-founder and chairman of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia from 1977 to 2016. He initiated the publication of a series of listings of known pipe organs in all states of Australia and has advised widely on the restoration and construction of pipe organs in four Australian states and New Zealand. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1999 for service to Australia's cultural heritage through the Organ Historical Trust of Australia. He is editor of the OHTA Newsletter. He is a longstanding member of Camberwell Historical Society.

*Lost Pipe Organs of Australia* was issued late last year by the Organ Historical Trust of Australia in association with the international publisher XLibris. It commemorates the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Trust, whose co-founders, John Henwood and John Maidment, are Camberwell residents.

John began his talk by stating that the book is a pictorial record of pipe organs large and small which have been lost to fire, vandalism, natural disasters, being turned into spare parts or just stored and eventually lost.

The talk focused on some of the splendid concert organs that graced Melbourne from the later 19th century onwards, including the extraordinary instrument in the Melbourne Exhibition Building. George Fincham built it in 1880 for the Exhibition at his factory in Bridge Road, Richmond. It took many months to build, but by 1948 the contents of the organ were gone and in 1965 the case was destroyed. The Exhibition building itself only survived by one vote in Parliament. The organ was 40' high, 60' wide and 20' deep. The console was unusual as it was modelled on the one in Notre Dame, Paris with the stops in semi-circular terraces. There are no photographs of it. The main problem with this organ was generating enough wind to power it. Hydraulic engines were brought in to power it, but a gas engine had to build up the pressure for the hydraulics, and even then, it didn't work well. A huge choir stall was incorporated in the design. In 1901 the organ featured in the first opening of Parliament with the Duke and Duchess of York. This was recorded in the Tom Roberts painting, which appears on the front cover of the book.

Other famous instruments include the 1872 Hill & Son organ at Melbourne Town Hall and the 1892 Fincham & Hobday organ at St Kilda Town Hall.

John talked about George Fincham, 1828 – 1910 and some of the organs he built. The factory was in Bridge Road, Richmond. St Kilda Town Hall organ 1892 was built by Fincham & Hobday. It was rebuilt in 1961 and the case discarded. The 1991 fire destroyed the organ and the \$180,000 insurance payment was used for other purposes. George Fincham was succeeded by his son and grandson.

The builders of many pipe organs: Alfred Fuller of Kew, William Anderson 1832 – 1923 and William Leopold Roberts 1882 – 1971 and Hill, Norman and Beard 1927 – 1974 of Clifton Hill were all talked about. Many of the manufacturers of imported organs such as Henry Bevington were from England. Despite the heavy tariffs there were many organs by this firm imported. St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney had an 1840 Bevington with a case designed by A. W. N. Pugin. It was the largest organ in Australia until its destruction by fire in 1865.

John talked about the 1982 Casavant Frères organ, formerly in Hamer Hall, which has been in storage since 2010. A good news story is the Barossa Regional Gallery, housed in the Soldiers Memorial Hall, Tanunda, SA, which has a restored Hill & Son organ. This was originally built in 1877 for Adelaide Town Hall and enlarged in 1886 by Fincham & Hobday, Adelaide. It was rebuilt in 1969-70 by Laurie Pipe Organs Pty Ltd, Melbourne and then restored and reconstructed between 2004 - 2014 by George Stephens and others.



Above: Garry Warne, Christopher Trikilis, John Maidment and John Mallinson

**Dr Brenda Niall: *Can You Hear the Sea?*  
15 May 2018**

Brenda Niall is one of Australia's foremost biographers. Her acclaimed biography *Mannix* won the 2016 Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal for Literature and the National Biography Award. In 2004 she was awarded the Order of Australia for 'services to Australian literature, as an academic, biographer and literary critic'.

For more than 40 years, Brenda Niall's biographies have been a source of wisdom, insight and pleasure. Few other writers have such an ability to understand and describe the relationships that create the characters of her subjects. For Niall, these are as formative as any crisis or moment in history; her characters are seldom shaped by anonymous forces. A group portrait, *The Boyds* (2002), for example, is wonderful in the way it describes the overlapping circles of influence within one large, creative family. At the other end of the spectrum, her superb biography *Mannix* (2015) is a portrait of loneliness. You leave that book mourning the fact that Archbishop Daniel Mannix may have been important to Australia, but he was personally important to few people. (Michael McGirr, Dean of Faith at St Kevin's College, Melbourne)

In *Can You Hear the Sea?* Brenda Niall tells the story of her grandmother, Agnes 'Aggie' Maguire. Aggie's parents fled the Irish famine in the middle of the nineteenth century and landed in Liverpool where Aggie was born, the fifth child of eleven. In 1888, nineteen-year-old

Aggie and her sister Minnie travelled with their brother Joe to Australia where they had an uncle. The growing affluence of the family and its resulting gentrification had curbed both Aggie and Minnie's freedoms, and the voyage to Australia presented a way out.

Joe died at sea. Before he died, he gave Aggie a box he made onboard in the carpenter's shop. When Brenda Niall turned 10, Aggie gave it to her. It was a surprising gift as Aggie always gave her grandchildren books. This box was the impetus for the book. It is based on the memories of Aggie's twenty-five grandchildren. Brenda Niall aimed to make her grandmother's "silence speak".

Aggie's life was one of quiet generosity and stoic resolve. She had married into a family of graziers, however her husband Richard Gorman died young, leaving her with seven children. She was expected to provide sons for the war. Her husband's brother was trying to run everything. Aggie had much to endure and most of the time she responded with stoic strength.

Brenda Niall shared her own stories of her grandmother, remembering how she moved into an unprepossessing flat in Melbourne's Kew. She chose to be close to where many of her grandchildren were attending boarding school and the flat became Granny's Sunday Sanctuary. It is clear that she found joy in the company of her grandchildren. Her only real escape was in literature. All her life, she read avidly, a passion she wanted to pass on to her grandchildren.

Telling her grandmother's story presented Brenda Niall with challenges she has not encountered before. On the one hand, she could draw on her own memories and those of her cousins who recalled Aggie. On the other hand, Niall found a paucity of formal sources. The book is about uncovering the life story of somebody Brenda loved but had never fully known. It is a loving tribute to a woman who was daughter, niece, sister, wife, widow and mother of seven. The title of the book refers to one of Aggie's treasures: a brown and white conch shell she kept on the windowsill near her armchair. She had always longed to live by the sea.



Above: Brenda Niall, Wendy Baden-Powell and Neil Munro

## MEETINGS FOR 2018

**Saturday June 23 2018 (2pm meeting)**  
**25 Inglesby Road Camberwell**

**Dr David Smith: Enriching the past by capturing the present**  
How modern technology makes family histories easy to record

**Saturday July 21 2018 (2pm meeting)**  
**25 Inglesby Road Camberwell**

**James Nicolas: The mystery of Fairylands, Kew**

**Saturday August 25 2018 (2pm meeting)**

**AGM**

**Monday September 24 2018 (9.30am for 10am)**

**Government House tour cost: \$18**  
**Photo ID needed**

**Tuesday October 23 2018 (8pm meeting)**

**Dr Sue Taffe: A White Hot Flame: Mary Montgomerie Bennett**

**Tuesday November 27 2018 (8pm meeting)**

**TBA**

## CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY DONATIONS TO THE COLLECTION

Camberwell Historical Society welcomes donations of the following items relating to the former City of Camberwell: photographs and prints, documents, letters, diaries, maps, plans, books, pamphlets, and reminiscences of former residents and people who worked in the area.

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.

## CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC

ABN 79 935 200 741      Incorporation No A0041541Y  
Affiliated with The Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Inc

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*Camberwell History*: Editor — Adèle Fernando-Swart

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