



Founded 1926

HISTORY WEST™

PUBLISHED BY THE ROYAL WESTERN AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

May 2023

GENERAL MEETING

The monthly general meeting at Stirling House is on Wed 17 May at 6pm when Ron Banks will present a talk on 'Reporting the Second World War'. Refreshments available from 5.30pm; Bookshop open until 6pm.



Ron's talk will examine how the media, and particularly *The West Australian* newspaper, both supported and reported the Second World War when men of his father's generation enlisted after Prime Minister Menzies declared that the country was at war with Germany. He is interested in media coverage of this period and in reflecting on how journalism has changed since the war. Ron will compare the media then and now, drawing on the past and on his own experience as a journalist.

Ron Banks is a former arts editor of *The West Australian* who has written three books since his retirement. The first, *Other Times*, was a personal reflection of *The West* when he joined the newspaper on the cusp of the digital age. The second, *Fragments - of a 50s childhood*, recounted growing up in the suburbs of Perth in the 1950s. His third, just published, explores family history and how the Second World War was reported across the country. *Dad's Army* ponders the question of why men go to war – reflecting on his father's and his grandfather's generations, and on his own generation's often unwilling involvement in the

Vietnam War in the 1960s. His research into newspaper reports of the period has led him to issues such as wartime exemptions for civilian workers, internment, conscientious objection, the Anzac legend and the way writers and playwrights have turned their experiences into works of art.



SAVE THE DATE for the HISTORY WEST ANNUAL LECTURE

26 July 2023, 6 for 6.30pm at UWA Club Auditorium

Dr Marie-Louise Ayres — National Library of Australia

From Perth to Canberra and back again: 3000 kilometres but only nanoseconds apart

In this lecture, Dr Ayres will ponder the ways in which Australia's 'tyranny of distance' has nurtured a level of national collaboration around cultural collections which is extremely rare in the broader international environment.

Beginning with Western Australian heritage materials held by the National Library of Australia and the ways in which those collections can be used by Western Australians, Dr Ayres will elaborate on the professional cultures and systems that underpin Australia's rich and connected cultural collections.

Booking details in June's *History West*

Margaret Medcalf Award 2023 — Call for Nominations

Recognising excellence in research and referencing of WA's State archives.

Any work completed or published in 2022 calendar year is eligible.

Nominated works need not be published, may be fiction or non-fiction, and in any media.

To submit a nominated work please complete a nomination form and email it along with an online link to sro@sro.wa.gov.au

Final date for entries — Friday 19 May 2023

See: <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/announcements/nominations-are-called-the-2023-margaret-medcalf-award>

The Royal WA Historical Society (Inc.) | 49 Broadway | NEDLANDS Western Australia 6009
TELEPHONE: (08) 9386 3841 | FACSIMILE: (08) 9386 3309 | EMAIL: admin@histwest.org.au
FACEBOOK: [facebook.com/histwest](https://www.facebook.com/histwest) | WEB: www.histwest.org.au | ABN: 43 607 110 473
LIBRARY EMAIL: library@histwest.org.au | MUSEUM EMAIL: museum@histwest.org.au

2023 Giant Second Hand Book Sale

Congratulations to Pamela and Nick and their team of over fifty volunteers on a highly successful book sale!

This year's second hand book sale was supposed to be remarkable for opening on Friday afternoon for the first time. Instead it will be known as the storm-damaged book sale. Thursday night, before the opening, brought so much rain it destroyed one marquee and flooded two whole categories of books, Science and Craft, as well as seriously depleting Crime Fiction and other subjects. Approximately twenty of our valiant volunteers arrived to peel back wet cardboard boxes and sort the dry from the water-damaged books. Our guardian angel – Steve Drake-Brockman – came with two Dutch friends and took away a huge pile of wet cardboard and wet books – so that by Friday afternoon it was hard to see any evidence of the deluge.

Mammoth efforts had preceded this event. On Wednesday of the previous week Steve Drake-Brockman had brought three truckloads of books from his lockup to the Society where Bruce Hoar had helped lay out their places by subject. In total, 615 boxes of books were brought in. Colin Strickland and Ian Beresford Peirce also provided invaluable manpower. Then the pricing began. In total 27 members offered to help but we were so efficient not all were needed. The Library and Museum volunteers pulled well above their weight.

More volunteers took part in the actual sale, unpacking boxes, tidying tables, helping people find books and, of course, taking the money. Custom was slow compared to other years but our end result was higher than last year. Friday was the biggest success when we made c\$6000 in two hours. Saturday brought in c\$7500 and Sunday c\$4500, making a grand total of sales c\$18,000.

Sunday evening again brought out valued volunteers for the necessary manpower to pack up. Thankfully 50 boxes went to Anglicare and another 50 to the Salvos, all neatly addressed by Val. A relieved Nick then poured a thank-you glass for all. By mid-day Monday there was no sign of the sale: marquees, fences, tables, signs, bunting, boxes and books all gone.

Pamela & Nick Drew

Mystery Photos: A Dempster family tintype

Hilaire Natt



This rare example of a tintype from the Society's collection (P1999.1191) is identified only as — Members of the Dempster family, donor unknown. The date c1900 is given but this may be a guess. The clothing fashions could be a clue.

Tintypes were a cheaper version of the earliest form of photography, daguerrotypes or wet plate collodian positives. Developed in the mid-1850s tintypes used as a backing, a thin iron plate painted black with a collodian coating which, when exposed to light, like daguerrotypes produced a single reversed image, which looked like a positive. However these images were 'muddy' and small and were soon superseded by the *carte de visite*.

Cartes de visite were taken in a studio using elaborate cameras and glass negatives which could print multiple copies on card. The process revolutionised photography – and family photograph albums. Rica Erickson in *The Dempsters* (UWAP, 1978) noted that in 1867 all

members of the extensive family had their photographs taken at the new business of Manning and Knight. The studio was next door to daughter Annie in Fremantle, who noted the firm 'had by far the best cameras and they were so obliging that it is quite a pleasure to sit for them'. This was a change from the usual ordeal when subjects had to remain perfectly still for several seconds or face the wrath of the photographer. Some of the resulting *cartes de visite* feature in Rica's book. However, until the end of the 19th century the tintype remained popular with itinerant photographers travelling in country areas. Tintypes did not require a studio and these examples from the Society's collection were probably taken at one of the Dempster family's rural properties or in a nearby town.

James Maclean Dempster had arrived in the colony on 25 January 1830 as mate on the ship *Eagle*. He married Ann Pratt in 1836 and their descendants became one of the most successful families in the colony. The Dempster sons established extensive pastoral properties on the Avon, near Northam, and in the southwest, and were the first colonists at Esperance. They were also successful merchants.

If you have any information about the tintypes reproduced here, please contact the library@histwest.com.au or phone 9386 3841.



History West Community Centre Fundraiser

An Evening with the Samsons

President Richard Offen

In 1835 Lionel Samson built himself a cottage at 35 Cliff Street, Fremantle, which is still owned by the family. The cottage sits next door to the firm's magnificent office building, constructed in 1898 after a fire destroyed the previous building. Luckily the cottage survived and in 1978/79 was converted into the company's museum and theatrette, with the cellar serving as an elegant function room.

It was in the cottage and cellar that the RWAHS was privileged to hold a fundraising supper on Sunday, 26 March. With only 60 tickets available, the event was a 'sell-out' with hopeful people on a waiting list.

The proceedings commenced in the theatrette with a joint presentation from Bill Samson and his sister, Jacqueline Wisdom, on the history of the Samson family. Following this fascinating insight into this Fremantle family, small groups took it in turns to visit the Samson Museum on the floor above the theatrette.

Whilst the museum viewings were taking place, the rest of the guests were treated to a screening of 'Fremantle Through the Lens', a compilation of amateur footage by Sir Frederick Samson in the 1950s and 1960s. Sir Frederick was an iconic Fremantle figure, affectionately known as 'Mr Fremantle'. He was Mayor from 1951 to 1972 and, during that time, filmed events and everyday life in the city.

Everyone then adjourned to the Cellar, where a magnificent buffet supper, prepared and served by members of the Samson family, awaited them. The repast included ham kindly provided by D'Orsogna, a well-known meat products firm with a 70-year history, all washed down with wine kindly supplied by Plantagenet Wines.

D'Orsogna also generously provided three large hams which were auctioned at the end of the evening. Plantagenet Wines showed similar generosity in providing six raffle prizes each of two bottles of their wine in Plantagenet wine carriers.

The evening concluded with the President offering hearty thanks to the Samson family for their kindness and generosity in hosting such a wonderful evening. He also thanked D'Orsogna and Plantagenet Wines for their significant contribution to the evening's success. As well those present enthusiastically joined the President in wishing our dear friend Margaret Metcalf a very happy birthday, that anniversary falling on the day of this event.

The evening has raised the Society just a tad short of \$7,000, but more than that, it was a wonderful social occasion. The *Inquirer & Commercial News* summed up a similar event in 1875 with the following words, 'The most amiable feeling existed between the entertainers and the entertained'. The same could certainly be said of the Society's evening in the company of the very hospitable Samson family.





MA1939.14a



Stories from the Storerooms Benjamin Robins — a shepherd made good

Dorothy Erickson

The Society's collection holds two sterling silver chalice-like presentation cups with floral, arabesque designs and inscribed 'Presented by the York Agricultural Society to Mr B. Robins for the best mare shewn at their Annual Meeting'. One is marked 1842 and the other simply 184 with the final number missing, and are some of the earliest silver in the collection. Mrs Helena Maria Johnson Habgood (1884-1957), wife of Robert Henry Habgood, grandson of early colonist Robert Mace Habgood, gave them to the Society in 1939. She was a granddaughter of other early colonial families, the Johnsons and John Wall Hardeys. Both these families arrived on the *Tranby*.

The York Agricultural Society was founded in 1840 in the first inland town in the colony where the annual show and later race meetings were highlights of the season. What relationship existed between the winner of this cup, Benjamin Robins, and the donor, Helena Habgood, has not been established. Her husband's family had been silversmiths in London and owned the Western Australian Habgood stores among other enterprises. Robert Mace Habgood had been a Director of the WA Bank and the Geraldine Mining Co and also owned farming properties in the Northam district of the Avon Valley.

In the 1840s there was a desperate shortage of labour in the colony partly caused by a boom in the sandalwood trade that drew much of the free labour. Settlers over the hills in the York district led by the Burges brothers who were short of labour petitioned the Governor for assistance, resulting in Parkhurst Penitentiary youths arriving in October of 1842 and eventually in the introduction of convicts.

Meanwhile shepherds were able to acquire enough flocks to become pastoralists and landowners in their own right. Most of the Scottish shepherds, such as the McPhersons, did very well, moving to large areas further up the valley near New Norcia. They were able to do this as there was a shortage of

coin in the colony resulting in the shepherds being paid in sheep with some very soon owning more than their masters. In the Avon Valley where the settlements of York and Toodyay were located this was the case. Some may also have traded in sandalwood, plentiful in the area and prized in China.

Benjamin Robins (1808-1863), who arrived in 1831 at the age of 28 on the *Atwick* with the Trimmer family, was by the 1840s a shepherd at Beverley when he showed his mare at the York Agricultural Society's annual show. He was a canny shepherd who had married Mary Elisabeth Devenish in Guildford in 1838. They had thirteen children. By the 1850s he was doing well on the grasslands around York. They had been selectively burnt for generations by Aboriginal people to provide open rangelands, thus encouraging new growth grass where kangaroos were enticed to graze which made them easier to spear for food.

Robins moved to Guildford where he became a butcher with a nearby farm 'Waterhall'. He is an example of the many successful shepherds who moved into land ownership in the 1850s. His many children were undoubtedly helpful and could be economically employed in his various endeavours. He did, however, employ ticket-of-leave labourers in 1862-3 before his early death in 1863, the year his youngest child was born. His eldest son, by then 24 years old, seems to have taken over his father's business but also had land at Helena and Bally Bally, Beverley, where others of the family became established. Two sons and two daughters married into the Sewell and Chester families in York.

Benjamin Robins was a shepherd made good, very typical of the early days of the colony.

Don't miss out on your copy of *Early Days*!

Time is running out to register for your copy

Due to rising costs, automatic distribution of our journal has ceased.

To receive your copy of *Early Days* in 2023, you must register before the end of June.

We would hate you to miss out, so please contact Lesley — 9386 3841, admin@histwest.org.au

or Nick — 0409 290 895, nickdrew@bigpond.com.au

Record whether you want hard copy, digital copy or both.

The Wilyabrup cottage: a problematical provenance

Gillian Lilleyman

Member Gillian Lilleyman has just published her new book titled *Purpose Built - The Making of Caves Road*. History West highly recommends it. In the research process, Gillian found that Wilyabrup Cottage had uncertain provenance and determined to research further. Here is the complicated story she uncovered. Thanks to Gillian we now know the cottage is most likely of 1920s origin.



Wilyabrup cottage today

Cowaramup Bay. The other was Sussex Location 73, a 40-acre holding further south on Biljedup Brook.

According to a McGregor family archive, the Biljedup property was the only block fenced and with a stockyard and a dwelling. As early maps show a track leading to and from Sussex Location 73, the property would have been a stopover place for McGregor and his sons on their travels between the capes: Fanny Brockman in her diary often mentioned them bringing mail or people to the Margaret. This suggests that, as well as running cattle, the McGregors provided a carriage service, resting and changing horses at Biljedup Brook. The Biljedup cottage later burnt down. The only sign of it by the 1970s was rubble from a limestone chimney and white irises blooming nearby in spring. But its role on the McGregors' run possibly led to another claim about the cottage at Wilyabrup—that it was the changing station for Percy Bignell's coach service to the Margaret River caves.

The former McGregor property was definitely owned by Percy Bignell. Seeing the potential of caves tourism, the Busselton pharmacist began buying land at Wilyabrup on which to keep horses in 1901. He eventually owned over 2,000 acres in the valley. His first purchase was Woodlands, a 100-acre holding owned by William Dalgety Moore. Except for a corridor resumed in 1902 for what would become Caves Road, title to this property (Sussex Location 187) transferred to Bignell in 1907. Two years later he acquired title to the adjoining Sussex Location 165, which after Daniel McGregor's death had passed to his son, Gaven.

Wilyabrup proved a convenient halfway place to change carriage teams, especially once Cave House opened at Yallingup in late 1903. When Bignell ordered a specially made motor vehicle to service the Busselton to Yallingup run in 1907, he had up to 25 horses ferrying caves visitors during the holiday season. Amenities were nevertheless minimal. Passengers during the Christmas period in 1909 voiced concerns about the heavy workload by horse-drawn vehicles on the route from Yallingup to Margaret River. The stabling at Wilyabrup was described as 'three rails across a log to keep the horses from straying; no shed or cover, though we saw a stable being erected some distance away, and about time too'. This description infers that there were no established farm buildings on either of Bignell's Wilyabrup blocks before then; thus substantiating the McGregor archive that Biljedup was the only block fenced and with a cottage.

Casting further doubt on the accepted provenance of the Brookland Valley cottage is its design. Unlike local 1880s buildings such as Old Bridge House and Glenbourne, which were built of vertical slab cut timbers, the Wilyabrup cottage is clad with horizontal dressed weatherboards. Daniel McGregor was reputedly a shareholder in Henry Yelverton's Quindalup timber mill, so he may well have had ready access to dressed timber in 1881. However, the building bears a striking resemblance to a 1920s group settlement house or 'groupie'. Although door and window styles varied, groupies were built to a standard plan of four rooms with ten-foot high ceilings and a small front and rear verandah. The Wilyabrup cottage and the group settlement house at the Old Settlement in Margaret River both have 24 boards to ceiling height, with seven above and seven below the windows, similarities that suggest the Wilyabrup cottage was a prototype for this design.



Wilyabrup cottage 1940s/50s.
Courtesy Mike Bignell

However the 1940s/50s photograph shows the building without a front verandah and Percy Bignell's grandson Mike, who lived on the property in the 1950s, recalls the cottage without a front verandah. He says that new owners Malcolm and Dee Jones added it when they restored the building in the 1980s.

As the absence of a front verandah and garden suggests transience, it is more likely that the cottage is in fact a group settlement house. Unable to make a living, many group settlers walked off their blocks in the 1930s and abandoned their houses, one of which Percy Bignell acquired, probably from the nearby Wilyabrup complex, and relocated to the present site.

References

- Gaven McGregor, Oral History. *Busselton Oral History Group*.
South-Western News, 23 Aug 1907. *West Australian*, 23 Mar 1910. *Sunday Times*, Aug 1924.
 Shelley Cullen, et al, *Margaret River Style*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999, p. 44

Affiliates & other news

Augusta Historical Society has recently hosted two interesting guest speakers. The first was Guy de la Bedoyere, a noted British historian who has published widely on Roman Britain and appeared on TV in 'Time Team'. Guy spoke on the curious relationship between an ancient Roman cameo, Peter Paul Reubens and the Dutch East India ship *Batavia*. This special event was limited to members of the Augusta and Margaret River historical societies. The annual dinner this year celebrated the 193rd anniversary of the landing of the first European settlers to Augusta on the *Emily Taylor*. A small band of settlers included the Turner family and a small garrison led by Captain Molloy and his wife Georgiana. Dr Nonja Peters – historian, anthropologist and social researcher – spoke on the heritage that the Netherlands and Australia share from 1606 to 2023. Augusta Historical Society meets on the third Thursday of the month at 7.00pm from September to May and visitors are welcome. The Society is in recess in June, July and August. The Society's room is attached to the Augusta Museum building in Blackwood Avenue. All enquiries to the secretary - augustahistsoc@gmail.com

Broome Historical Society & Museum has developed a website that is well worth exploring. Visit its Virtual Museum, which is titled 'Race, Rights & Rivalries' and invites you to explore stories and historical items relating to Broome's changing multicultural population. With a focus on citizenship rights, it highlights the treatment and experiences of differing groups and individuals who have lived in the district over time.

Darlington History Group recommends its Darlington Village Walkabout for everyone who enjoys walking to visit interesting places. Autumn is the best time of year to do it, say the locals. There are 22 points of interest on this interactive walk. Visit Walking Maps website for more information, and then take yourself and your phone for a 40-minute walk around Darlington: www.walkingmaps.com.au/walk/4242

Eastern Goldfields Historical Society reminds us of its collection of interesting books on goldfields history written by Norma King and includes her lively account of the mice plague of 1942 in Wiluna in the latest newsletter!



Congratulations to **Harvey & Districts Historical Society** for a successful photographic display, especially of brides' and bridesmaids' dresses.



Maylands Historical & Peninsula Assn holds monthly talks in the Old Dining Room of the Peninsula Hotel in Maylands. April's talk by John

McLennan explored the history of women's football, which began in 1921 and included a Norwood-Maylands team. Terry Devereux's talk on 15 May is titled 'Saving the Peninsula Hotel' and begins at 7.30pm. All welcome.

Swan River Pioneers are celebrating Foundation Day on Saturday 3 June at the Parmelia Hilton Hotel with a colonial breakfast at a cost of \$45.00 per person. To make contact with the organisers and book a place email: swanriverpioneers@gmail.com See website — www.swanriverpioneers.com

Woodloes Homestead, 39 Woodloes St, Cannington, is the venue for a talk by Anthony Lunt titled 'Francis Bird, 1845-1937: immigrant, entrepreneur, architect, and gentleman'; to be held on Sunday 7 May 2023 from 2pm. You can book at:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/francis-bird-1845-1937-immigrant-entrepreneur-architect-and-gentleman-tickets-548211002867>

History in the City

Rachel Roe



Lady and Sir John Forrest in later years at The Bungalow

Our April presentation by Chris Holyday illuminated the talent, skills and considerable achievements of Margaret Forrest (née Hamersley). Margaret was an excellent botanical artist, with paintings in the WA Art Gallery. Following marriage to John Forrest in 1876 she organised many social events at the centre of the colony's political and social life, and played a leading role in many organisations. Margaret's parents Edward and Anne Louise Hamersley had eight children. It was delightful to experience this presentation in a room packed with Hamersley descendants!

If you missed this talk – the good news is that due to a technological glitch and inability to see the visuals, Chris has offered to give another presentation, either towards the end of this year or early next year to coincide with the publication of his book on Margaret Forrest.

We look forward to your company at Citiplace Community Centre for 2pm start, \$10 includes afternoon tea and door prize ticket.

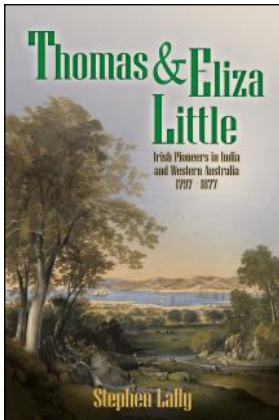
3 May – Trish Woodman: WA's Involvement in the Boer War (1899-1902).

7 June – John Viska: Hyde Park - History and Conservation.

Book Reviews

Stephen Lally, *Thomas & Eliza Little: Irish Pioneers in India and Western Australia 1797-1877*, Stephen Lally, 2022. In Library.

Reviewer: Pamela Statham Drew



First cousins Thomas Little and Eliza Lally knew one another from youth in poverty-stricken Ireland and forged a partnership that saw them survive and prosper against the odds. The author is Eliza's great-great-nephew. Thomas and Eliza's story is divided into three parts — Ireland, India and Swan River — and provides an welcome account of a less well-known part in WA's colonial history.

To find better lives Thomas and his younger brothers enlisted in 1823 in the East India Company army, which was happy to recruit in Catholic Ireland. Eliza was also accepted in the small quota of allowed wives and they sailed on the overcrowded *Macqueen* for Calcutta. By 1825 Thomas had been promoted to administrative duties, which meant higher pay and separate living quarters. Their son, Thomas Jr, was born in Dinapore in 1831 and son William followed in 1833. When brother-in-law Michael and his wife died, Thomas adopted their surviving daughter Maria.

In India Thomas met Charles Prinsep, a wealthy man who was Standing Legal Counsel to the East India Co. Prinsep had a strong interest in Australia and took Thomas on as Agent for an investment in Swan River Colony to raise horses for the Indian Army, hiring the *Gaillardon* to carry stock and workers for the new venture and giving Thomas £5000 to purchase land and other necessities. Thomas, Eliza and the three children arrived at Fremantle in 1838. Thomas' first purchase for Prinsep was 1,832 acres of the Leschenault Peninsula, next to Stirling's own grant. The narrow peninsula on the coast and near a sheltered harbour was good for breeding stock. Thomas and his men took a year to build a large, high-quality timber building named 'Belvidere'. The family moved in and were well-settled when the first of the Australind ships entered the bay in 1841.

Thomas went out of his way to assist the Australind settlers, lending workers, equipment and oxen. However signs were not promising. Thomas returned to India to tell Prinsep that his estate, after five years, was still not profitable. Prinsep however had faith in the scheme, and Thomas and family returned in March 1843. Stock from Prinsep's Tasmanian venture were moved to Swan River though at a terrible cost with most of the horses dying. Thomas bought more land, gradually building up the estate to 23,277 acres (9,420 ha) by 1850. The late 1840s saw much commerce with the American whalers who frequented the inlet and happily exchanged clothing and many other goods for fresh food.

Thomas extended his reputation as vintner in the late 1840s, importing vines from South Africa for both 'Belvidere' and land he acquired on his own account in the Dardanup district. By 1852 he had leased 12,300 acres there, and decided to leave his position with

Prinsep. He constructed a grand, two-storey mansion named Dardanup Park with five bedrooms, an indoor bathroom, ballroom and grand staircase. He developed a major farming enterprise that brought him a good income for over ten years — with cattle and grain [mainly corn], olives and vines. In June 1866 his Constantia grapevines had expanded to 45000 vines, producing 12,000 bottles of wine a year, most exported to Sydney where he won awards. He continued his interest in horses and some he bred did well in eastern colonial races.

Thomas was a strong supporter of the Catholic Church, raising money for the Fremantle church to look after young Catholic immigrants. Thomas also built a church on his land that was the envy of the remaining Australindes. However sectarian divisions were deep at this time, Swan River's first Catholic Colonial Secretary, Richard Madden, commenting on arrival that he found the local priest 'contending single handed against the entire local government, every member of which, with two exceptions, was bitterly opposed to Catholicity'. There were only five influential Catholics in the colony according to the Sisters of Mercy: Madden, Patrick Marmion, Capt Scully, Bernard Smith and the Littles.

Thomas' generosity came at a cost however and creditors began demanding repayment of money he had borrowed, while years of drought and crop disease took away any returns from the property. Eliza died suddenly in 1866 and Thomas in 1877. His funeral was the biggest Bunbury had seen to that time. Thomas and Eliza did not leave substantial assets but they were widely respected for their philanthropy, hospitality and fair dealing.

This is a book to be recommended.

Michelle McKeough, *This Fearful Plague: Bubonic Plague in Western Australia 1900-1906*, Hesperian Press, 2022. In Library.

Reviewer: Lenore Layman



Between 1900 and 1906 a total of 81 West Australians contacted bubonic plague and almost half died. The plague epidemic has been largely forgotten today and Michelle McKeough's new book on the subject is a reminder of a time when WA's overseas links were via sea and subject to the fearful epidemics that intermittently swept the maritime world — bubonic plague (the most fearful), smallpox, cholera, typhoid, yellow fever and influenza.

Quarantine controls were necessary at all overseas ports and quarantine stations were a crucial part of government infrastructure. Fremantle, like most ports linking countries to the wider world, developed a reputation as a dirty, drunken, dangerous place with many poor working people living in tenements or overcrowded housing with bad sanitation. The threat of infectious disease was ever-present.

This book traces the plague's course through Fremantle, Perth and Geraldton, exploring a public

health system that proved ineffective in handling the crisis. It was above all a story of divided authority and administrative inadequacy. While there was inoculation treatment for patients if the plague was caught early enough, it was the challenge of prevention that overwhelmed early 20th century public health practices. The author's archival research has been thorough and demonstrates the systemic failure of the system of central and local boards of health. This resulted in a new State public health structure in 1911 — the creation of the WA Public Health Department. The Fremantle Harbour Trust's establishment in 1902 to take overall control of the port was another significant reform measure.

The author tells the story of the epidemic from 1900 to 1906 chronologically as it waxed and waned, spreading through central Fremantle and then central Perth with a brief outbreak in Geraldton. Those who caught the disease are named, their circumstances described and their disease experiences detailed. In this way the personal face of the disease and the suffering it brought are highlighted. The first victim William Campbell was buried at sea in an iron coffin but this precautionary act led to public panic about fish contamination, therefore subsequent victims were cremated at Woodman's Point quarantine station. Public panic was intense and many public health actions – fumigation, destruction of property and forcible quarantine – caused much suffering in poor people's lives. Racial prejudice against the Chinese community meant that they were frequently blamed for the disease itself even as they were among its victims.

The book highlights the appalling, insanitary living and working conditions of the west end of Fremantle and central Perth — with accumulated filth and un-removed sewerage, ineffective or no drainage systems, plagues of rats, and overcrowded and filthy boarding

houses and hovels. The epidemic came at the close of two decades of economic boom when people flocked to WA from around the world dreaming of making their fortunes on the goldfields. This explosion of arrivals was impossible for local services and authorities to handle and urban amenities were overwhelmed. It is not surprising that slum housing spread, that pan-sanitary and rubbish removal systems couldn't cope, that vermin proliferated and that essential but noxious industries such as slaughterhouses added to inner urban blight. As well, unsafe drinking water meant that typhoid broke out alongside the plague in these years.

It is interesting to read this book after recently living through another worldwide pandemic and observing public health authorities and the public again grappling with the threat of overwhelming epidemic disease. A century after the plague came and went, 'cleanliness' was again the loudest of public health pleas, government controls on people's lives tightened sharply and the public responded variously. People's lives were and are changed permanently by these infectious disease episodes.

ADVERTISEMENT

4/1 Webster Street, Nedlands,
launching soon.
Single-level renovated villa,
two beds, two baths, lovely gardens.
Please call for details.



Daniel Ranshaw

0415 181 664
or
dranshaw@realmark.com.au

Realmark

Community Officer: Lesley Burnett
Editor History West: Dr Lenore Layman

Opinions expressed in *History West* are not necessarily those of the Royal WA Historical Society (Inc.).

If you're a member who receives this newsletter in hard copy by post, and you're happy to receive it by email, please contact 9386 3841 or admin@histwest.org.au with your email address, and save money and trees by receiving it online!