



June 2011

**EAST
MELBOURNE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER**

Contributions and Suggestions

We invite contributions relating to the history of East Melbourne from our members. Articles of up to 1500 words will be considered for publication. Small articles and items of interest are also welcome.

We would be pleased to receive your suggestions and ideas for activities, guest speakers, excursions or anything else you might like us to organize on your behalf.

Please contact any member of our committee.

Aims

A full Statement of Purposes appears in our Documents of Incorporation but briefly the aims of the Society are as follows:

- To foster an interest in the history of East Melbourne.
- To build an archive of material relevant to the history of East Melbourne.
- To promote interchange of information through lectures and tours.
- To promote heritage preservation.

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Membership

Membership of the East Melbourne Historical Society is open to all who are interested in the history of East Melbourne.

Enquiries: Deirdre Basham: 9421 3252

Annual subscription: \$25.00

Guests are welcome
at individual meetings \$5.00

**Affiliated with
The Royal Historical Society of Victoria**

President's Letter

Writing in 1883, Richard Twopeny commented that 'there is a bustle and life about Melbourne which you altogether miss in Sydney... you will find more 'society' in Melbourne, more balls and parties... more books and men of education and intellect, more and better theatrical and musical performances, more racing and cricket and football'. Without wishing to contribute to the stale old Melbourne/Sydney rivalry, Twopeny's comments still hold good in our town. At present, we have the luminous Von Guerard exhibition at the NGV, the Tutankhamen exhibition at the Melbourne Museum, the Bell Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Elegy* from the Australian Ballet, *La Boheme* at the opera, and Dr. Zhivago at the Comedy Theatre. Then, there's the football, that mighty gladiatorial competition, with its heights of glory and despair each week.

Here in East Melbourne, things are also moving. We have had weeks of work as the new water harvesting system goes in around Darling Square. Large tanks are also being installed in a similar project around the MCG. We have a very large – and concerning – development for the Australian Catholic University going on at the St. John's site on the block bounded by Victoria Parade, Hoddle St., and Albert St., while proposals for a bar at the bottom of Hotham St. and the apartment development behind Brahe Lane are awaiting appeal at VCAT. At the recent

East Melbourne Group AGM, Mayor Robert Doyle, marked changes to facilities in the Fitzroy Gardens as one of the Melbourne City Council's four major projects for this financial year. This involved a reduction in the area occupied by the depot, adjacent to Wellington Parade, and use of the freed space for a visitor centre and amenities.

So, we have plenty of 'bustle and life' in our suburb and, thankfully, plenty of rain, with water storages up to 54% full. The luxuriant growth has encouraged a pair of lorikeets to begin courting and to establish a home in a hollow in one of the elms at Yarra Park. I'm not sure they've got the best weather for it, but we wish them luck anyway.

Jill Fenwick
President

Valete

Sadly three people have died recently who were all well known to many members of the East Melbourne Historical Society. They will be much missed but fondly remembered.

Betty Hall

Betty Hall was an only child, the daughter of a railway man. As such her early life was one of constant movement as her father travelled round country Victoria with the gangs, laying and repairing the tracks. One of his postings took him to Gerang Gerung in the Wimmera, and so it was that Betty spent the last years of her education

at Dimboola High School from which she matriculated in 1951. She was head prefect that year. From there she went to Melbourne University where she studied Law. She did her articles with the firm of Purves & Purves (a firm founded by the descendants of James Liddell Purves K.C. of Mosspennoch, Clarendon Street) and remained with that firm for the rest of her career. She was admitted in 1957, became a partner in 1965 and a senior partner in 1982. She retired in 1988. Her specialty was Property Law and she was widely recognized among her colleagues as one of the best in the field. Gagens Lawyers, who took over Purves & Purves, have named their Hall Conference Room in her honour.

Betty moved to East Melbourne in 1985 and after her retirement she joined many of the community groups active in East Melbourne and was an enthusiastic contributor to them all. She was a very private but gregarious person who loved good conversation and debate, especially when accompanied by a glass of champagne.

Nora Riches

Nora Riches has died aged 103. Until recently she was still living at home, the one she bought with her husband, Arnold, when they moved to East Melbourne in 1979.

Nora was born in England where she grew up to become an actress, using her maiden name, Nora Peachey. In 1939 she and Arnold were sent by theatre company, C.J. Williamson, to New Zealand. Just as they arrived in Colombo war was declared. They travelled on to Sydney to find that their

contract had been cancelled, so there they stayed. She found work with the ABC on the children's show *The Argonauts*, taking the part of Stella the Stealing Starfish opposite Peter Finch as Silas the Sinister Shark. On moving to Melbourne Nora found a job with *Flair* fashion magazine. As well as working on fashion stories she brought to the magazine the idea of an eating-out column and each month would try out a different restaurant and write a short item about it.

We ran a short article about Nora's eventful life in our Newsletter of March 2008, on the occasion of her 100th birthday and for those who would like to know more we refer them to our website: http://emhs.org.au/system/files/2008_March_Newsletter.pdf

Bill Sutton

Bill Sutton, with his brother, Jim, was the owner of Sutton Tools, a company founded by his grandfather in 1917. It now has three factories in Victoria, one in New Zealand and a joint venture in India, together producing more than 100,000 tools a day. Last year The Victorian Government, in partnership with the Victorian Industry Manufacturing Council, inducted Bill and Jim Sutton into the Victorian Manufacturing Hall of Fame for their outstanding contributions to sustained manufacturing excellence in Victoria.

Bill, with his wife, Myra, first moved into East Melbourne in 1964 and together they have been great contributors to the life of this suburb, especially in their generous support of the East Melbourne Group and its work.

The sorry story of Dr Alexander Hunter, M.L.A. for East Melbourne, and his wife, Janet.

By Jill Fenwick

Dr. Alexander Hunter was born in Scotland, the son of the Reverend Alexander Hunter of Heriot. He had two sisters. In Edinburgh to study medicine, he married at the age of thirty, sometime in the early 1840s. His wife, Janet Rachel Handyside, could reasonably be said to be of a higher social status than he was: her two brothers were well established in their professions, one as a doctor, the other as Solicitor-General for Scotland and later Judge of the Court of Sessions. In addition, she had been left £1200 on the death of her father, a large amount of money in those days. As a result of this money, Alexander Hunter was able to study at the Edinburgh College of Surgeons and buy a handsome carriage and horses in order to establish his practice in Edinburgh.

Was it a love match? He was to claim so, telling a large crowd at Hockin's Hotel, Melbourne, on 10 September, 1859, that 'He married the woman who of all others he thought would make him happy and he lived happy for some time after his marriage until a son was born...' On the other hand, Janet was to write that her brother, Lord Handyside, believed that Hunter had no love for her and had only married her for her money. The marriage was not happy. According to Alexander Hunter, the birth of her son in 1846, brought out hereditary

madness in his wife and ruined his attempt to maintain a profitable practice in Edinburgh. He was finally forced to move out and go back to live with his widowed mother and sisters. According to Janet, he ran through her money and failed to establish himself professionally, so that 'furniture, my piano, horses and carriage were sold by warrant of the Sheriff for debt, and I was left, with my child, dependent on my brother.' Both of these versions of their life together come ten years after the events, however, when the couple became engaged in a very long and public dispute over their marriage.

Hunter was also engaged in politics in the late 1840s, throwing in his lot with the Chartist movement. In 1889, an anonymous writer to *The Argus* remembered him arriving at a Chartist rally on Kennington Green in a furniture van, 'a tall gaunt figure, surmounted by a hat with a very curly brim'. Whether it was because of money difficulties or as a result of his political activities, in 1849 Alexander Hunter left Edinburgh, setting out a ship's doctor on the barque *Victory*. His activities on board were a cause of dissent and brought both condemnation and praise. On 21st August 1849, *The Argus* published two letters of thanks to Captain Picken. These came from the paying passengers – the cabin passengers, the intermediate passengers – who praised

Captain Picken's 'uniform kindness and courtesy', but accused Dr. Hunter of attempting to 'excite disunion, disaffection and insubordination among all classes on board.' A third letter, this time from the twenty four fore-steerage passengers, also praised Captain Picken for his behaviour and professionalism. Whatever happened on the voyage of the *Victory*, it ended in the police court, where evidence was led against Dr. Hunter, causing the another letter to be published, this time of support from the Government Bounty Emigrants, who named him as 'a man of unblemished honour and of enlarged experience'. The court case was due, said the writers, to ill-will towards and with 'no pains spared to put down and injure Dr. Hunter.' It is interesting, however, to note, that this interpretation is one which Dr. Hunter was to use again and again over the course of the next ten years to explain both his own behaviour and the reasons for his insolvency.

Once in Port Phillip, Alexander Hunter began to set up his practice. He inserted a classified advertisement in *The Argus* of 9 October 1849:

Dr. Alexander Hunter FELLOW
OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF
SURGEONS OF EDINBURGH
SEVERAL YEARS BACK,
LECTURER OF ANATOMY IN
THE SCHOOL OF THE COLLEGE
OF SURGEONS Begs to intimate
that he proposes to commence
practice in Melbourne. Dr. Hunter
will devote himself exclusively to
surgical and consulting practice.

In another advertisement, he offers his services *pro bono*:

NOTICE – To the poorer classes of Melbourne and its Vicinity – Dr. Hunter, Consulting and Operating Surgeon, has made arrangements to devote from 9 to 10 o'clock every morning, to giving advice free, to all those classes who are anxious to consult him, but who, from circumstances, are unable to pay for it. 162 Great Collins Street, Eastern Hill.

In 1849, he is recorded as giving medical attention to a young lad who fell off his horse in Collins St. In 1850, he set up a subscription drive to raise funds to thank the keeper of the Melbourne Bridge, Mr. Doherty, for his rescue of people from the Yarra River. In 1851, he sued the keeper of the baths on the Yarra for embezzlement of £1/1/-. These first years, he testified, were prosperous: he made £1500 in his first year in the colony and by 1852, when he sent money for Janet's passage to Australia, he claimed to have made £6,000. Yet all was not well. According to his own testimony, he had critics in the colony from the beginning. First, they claimed that he was a Chartist and 'addicted to cutting off heads instead of legs'. Then, he was accused of being an atheist. But these accusations were not as harmful to his reputation as the last, 'that he was not a clean stick, that he was an adulterer'. It was this accusation that caused him to bring to Melbourne his mad wife, Janet, because the scandal would not go away. And, as



Collins Street c.1865. Photo by Charles Nettleton. La Trobe Picture Collection State Library of Victoria.

he told a large crowd gathered to hear why they should elect him as Member of the Legislative Assembly for East Melbourne in 1859, he covered up that madness, causing himself great suffering, and was only telling the electors about it because he feared 'Mrs Hunter would ruin his honour and his character, which he valued more than six millions and all the world into the bargain.'

He gave up his practice and moved to Brighton. Here he invested in building houses, borrowing against his own house, but ten months on, he was a poor man, and so he returned to the city to practise his profession once more. Again, enemies assailed him: Janet escaped from his custody

and took him to court and the justices did not see or refused to see that she was insane. She claimed she had been driven from his home and instead of sending her back to him, they listened to her story and awarded her maintenance. The scandal ruined his reputation and he was forced to declare himself bankrupt. Why did they do so? It was, he told the crowd, 'because they were not blind justices, they were infected with hatred of Hunter.' He offered as proof of Janet's state of mind comments made to him by two respected physicians, Dr. Singleton and Dr. Eades, whom, he claimed had examined his wife on her arrival in Melbourne and told him there was something wrong with her.

What were the facts of the matter? Janet Hunter and her son, William Hunter, had arrived in Melbourne in October 1852. In April 1854, she gave birth to a son who died, but on 31st May, 1854, made her first application for maintenance. In her evidence, Janet Hunter claimed that her husband had 'on half a dozen different occasions tied his wife up and horse-whipped her, and had turned her out of doors at night.' Alexander Hunter refuted these charges, claiming Janet was mad and demanding that she undergo a medical examination. The court, however, listened to her solicitor, Mr. Read who argued that she was a most respectable woman from a good family, awarding her £4 a week and ordering the defendant to pay £10 for the costs of the case.

The next case Janet Hunter brought was against her husband's housekeeper, Mrs. Lockhart. Mrs. Lockhart had taken possession of Janet Hunter's trunk, containing bedding, clothing and a portrait of her husband. Janet wanted either the return of her possessions or a sum of £10, which included £2/10/- for the expense of repairing the lock, broken by the defendant. Here the judge had difficulty: the trunk, legally speaking, was not Janet's, but her husband's, because a man had power over his wife's possessions. However, as Dr. Hunter had disposed of the property of his wife to another person and agreed to the return of the articles, he would find in her favour. Mrs. Lockhart, however, had refused to give up the

things she had taken. Mrs. Hunter said she would give up her claim if her clothing were returned, but said she didn't care about the portrait. She was awarded £10, to be reduced to one shilling if the articles were returned.

In January, 1855, Janet Hunter took her husband to court again, for non-payment of maintenance. He claimed insolvency and again, that she was mad. The court ordered him to pay £2/10/- into court each week and find two sureties of the same for three months. In August, 1855, they were again in court, Janet Hunter claiming that her husband owed her £17/10/- in maintenance. In July 1856, he was in court accused of perjury, following his evidence on 24 April that year that he could not afford to pay his wife a weekly allowance. In this case, Janet had claimed that she was destitute, while her husband maintained a house and servants. Her husband had asked her to go to his house. She went there, but was insulted by his servants, Mrs. Lockhart and Mrs. Eskell, had been ordered into the kitchen and had left the house through fear of his violence. The Bench determined that Hunter had a case to answer and committed him to trial. He was given bail of £100 of his own money and two sureties of £50 each.

In an extraordinary speech, Alexander Hunter thanked the Bench for its decision and proclaimed his gratitude: 'It was exactly what he wanted. His case would now be inquired into in a court competent to deal with it, and assisted by able

professional men. He should be able to convince the world that he had been an injured man... he was very grateful to the Court for sending the case before another court more competent to deal with it.'

His trials were not yet over. On 11 April 1857, he was arrested for assaulting Mr. William Henry Rigby, who had come to the house to evict him for non-payment of rent. In December 1857, Janet again applied for help to the Court: she had received no maintenance since July of that year and he was £10/10/- in arrears. Again, the court found in her favour, awarding costs of £8/8/- against him and binding him to pay £2/2/- per week through the clerk of court and the arrears. In October of the following year, she applied for an increase in her maintenance payment and the court gave her £3 per week. In May 1859, she was again in court summoning Hunter for his failure to comply with the court order for maintenance; the Court ordered his arrest. Life must have been extremely difficult for her. Unable to earn her own living, living in rented lodgings in Albert St. East Melbourne, she was dependant on the goodwill of a man who seemed to feel no obligation towards her – the balance of power, as Christine Twomey has pointed out, lay firmly with those who held the purse-strings.

Here the story takes another turn. Dr. Alexander Hunter, his livelihood threatened by the very public and long standing disputes with his wife, decided that he would stand for

Parliament and presented himself as a candidate for East Melbourne in the 1859 Legislative Assembly elections. He did not appeal to the professional men of the town or the gentlemen of the colony to support him. Instead, he presented himself as representing the working classes. He supported ownership of land for all; protection rather than free trade; a grant for Trades Hall; more schools and fewer public houses and said he desired 'to see working men in their honoured fustian jackets running, not up the back stairs, but the front stairs, and standing with arms akimbo studying the works of science and literature'. While two people in the crowd challenged his nomination of the grounds of his reputation, on 22 August 1859, he received the nomination and began campaigning in earnest. On 26 August, he was duly elected.

At this stage, the situation becomes more critical for Alexander Hunter. Hanging over him is his reputation as an adulterer and his base treatment of his wife. Thus, he brings these things to the centre of his post-election appearances and in successive speeches at the Princess Theatre and at Hockin's Hotel portrays himself as 'a man of high honour [who] had done no wrong ... to man, woman and child'. He was only speaking 'from a solemn sense of duty' and because he owed to his electors. He had suffered greatly from his wife's madness, a disease 'hereditary in her family' and his attempts to tell the various magistrates and judges were useless. In the end he was ruined 'his

splendid income gone ...his horses, carriage, furniture, bed and pillows, tables and chairs, instruments and books' all taken. He told the meeting at Hockin's Hotel that they should mark 'that Mrs Hunter had been taken from him, from his home and against his will.' At his side is his son, proof of his parenting – a son whom he refused to allow Janet to see.

Janet Hunter replied in a long letter, published in *The Argus* 12 September 1859. At the heart of the matter was the 'housekeeper' Mrs. Lockhart. Hunter's association with her was such a cause of scandal that he needed to have his wife in Melbourne to achieve respectability. When Janet had arrived in Melbourne in 1852, Mrs. Lockhart was living with Dr. Hunter and told Janet that she had no right to come to the colony. Dr. Hunter was hers, because she had perjured herself for him in court and had brought him many patients. He had promised her marriage. When Janet demanded of Dr. Hunter that Mrs. Lockhart be dismissed, he did not dare, because she might expose him. With nowhere to go, Janet stayed with Dr. Hunter and again became pregnant to him, but the birth of her baby brought things to crisis point. On her return from lying-in, the rage and frustration of the pair was unleashed upon her:

I was then deprived of all charge of my house, degraded, insulted, cruelly ill-treated, made the victim of her numerous faults... which caused him to horsewhip and confine me to my room and tie me to my bed, when my watch,

clothes and jewellery were taken from me, telling my child and servants I was mad, everything having been done to make me so.'

Janet Hunter fled the house on February 20 1854 'with the marks of horsewhips on my body', seen by the two doctors, Singleton and Eades. Then began her long struggle for maintenance. In July 1856, she was forced to return to Dr. Hunter by order of the court where, she writes 'I was cruelly ill-treated, insulted, kicked, kept in a room, and starved, different items of clothing were stolen from me, infamous lies told about me by Mrs. Lockhart, who said I was mad and told my child so, and lastly, was grossly insulted by Dr. Hunter framing a *de lunatic inquirendo* against me... for the purpose of getting me into a lunatic asylum... as Mrs. Lockhart said it was the only plan he could adopt to clear his character'.

Her letter was supported by a certificate, signed by Drs. Wilkie, Singleton, Eades, Campbell, Jacobs and six others declaring that 'We, the undersigned, hereby certify that that we have known Mrs. Hunter for some time; we believe her to be of sound mind and, from what she has suffered, are surprised she is so.' This was followed by separate letters from Dr. Eades and Dr. Singleton denying Hunter's claim that they had visited Mrs. Hunter two days after her arrival in the colony and found her insane. The visit had never happened and there was no truth in Dr. Hunter's assertions. All Dr. Hunter could say in

reply was that they were both solely interested in 'blackening and if possible destroying' his character.

The final act of this public drama was played out in April 1861, Alexander Hunter decided to leave the colony and move to New Zealand, thus out of the jurisdiction of the Victorian courts. This would leave Janet Hunter destitute, so she applied for an order asking him to provide security for due payment of £3 per week or £100. The defendant had, however, had found a loophole in the law: the law demanded a wife be given maintenance, but the Bench could only demand security 'if they found it necessary' and it was not necessary if the husband stated that he desired to have his wife with him and was willing to pay her fare. Dr. Hunter proclaimed that, broken in health, he was returning to Scotland with his son. He was 'ready and willing' to take his wife with him or to pay for her passage in another ship. Hearing these assurances, the three magistrates conferred and determined that Janet Hunter should take her husband's offer and return home, with money to this purpose being lodged with the Court. Her complaint was dismissed.

The money was never paid, a fact Dr. Hunter strenuously denied, but which was proved by an anonymous letter writer who submitted three letters of demand, two from Janet Hunter's solicitors and one from the police magistrate. He was arrested on board the *Donald McKay* and brought back to Melbourne, charged with leaving his wife destitute and without

means of support. Yet still he had his supporters: his old friend, Mr. Don, began a subscription drive to raise money for Dr. Hunter and a Select Committee of the Victorian House of Assembly was appointed to inquire whether the arrest was a breach of parliamentary privilege. *The Argus* wrote a heavily ironic editorial, proclaiming that he had been denied 'one of the commonest of people's rights – the liberty of running away from his wife' and that all Victorians should support the subscription and money be used to deport 'this cracked block... this brainless zany' from the colony.

Alexander Hunter was released on bail and fled the country, so that when the court was convened, all Janet could do was ask that the property he left in Melbourne – his horses and carriage, some furniture, some goods at the Mont de Pieté pawn office and some in the custody of Mrs. Lockhart, be sold to pay the money he owed her. The Bench issued the warrant.

What happened to Janet Hunter after this is unknown. Her son, young William Hunter, died on board the ship *London*, aged twenty, where he had been assistant surgeon. Dr. Alexander Hunter died in Hokitika, New Zealand on 6 April. The last word about him comes from the journalist Garryowen who recalls him in his memoir, *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*:

This Doctor Hunter was a tall, sallow-faced, black-haired, well-whiskered and well-developed individual, admittedly a clever operating surgeon, but too fond of the

steel for his first impulse on seeing a patient was... to effect an operation of some kind if possible... But it was as a stump orator, that Dr. Hunter appeared in the zenith of his fame, for he was the most bumptious talker and veriest political quack in creation. He once found his way into the Legislative Assembly, as member for East Melbourne, where his parliamentary career was as fruitless as an immense soap bubble.¹

Endnotes:

- 1 Garryowen Chronicles of Early Melbourne Vol. 2 Ferguson and Mitchell Collins St. 1888 p.887

References:

The Argus online:
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/home>
Garryowen
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Vol 2., Ferguson and Mitchell, Collins St., 1888.
Twomey,
Christine *Deserted and Destitute Motherhood, Wifehood and Colonial Welfare*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2002

Coming Events

Wednesday, 15 June at 8.00 p.m.
J.J. Clark – His Life and Architecture

John James Clark (1838-1915) designed many famous public buildings in Australia including, in Melbourne, the Treasury Building and the Royal Mint. He lived at 104 Gipps Street from 1869-1871. Our speaker, Dr. Andrew Dodd, completed his Ph.D. thesis on J.J. Clark at Melbourne University working with Prof. Miles Lewis and is now a senior lecturer in Journalism at Swinburne University.

This talk replaces the previously advertised talk by Dr. Valerie Krips on The Victorian Drawing Room, which we have had to cancel due to Dr. Krips' commitments overseas. However we hope to reschedule her talk next year.

Wednesday, 17 August, 8.00 p.m.
Researching the History of Your House

Prof. Miles Lewis is an architectural historian of international renown, and Professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne. He is the author of many books and countless papers on architectural history, heritage protection and urban planning. He will give an illustrated lecture on how to research the history of your house using both built and documentary evidence.

**Both talks at Clarendon Terrace,
210 Clarendon Street,
East Melbourne**