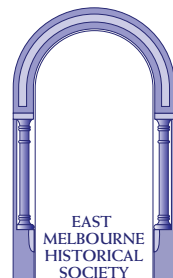


# EAST MELBOURNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



## September 2016

## 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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**CITY OF  
MELBOURNE**

## Committee

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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: Diane Clifford**  
dianeclifford1@gmail.com

Annual subscription: \$25.00

Guests are welcome  
at individual meetings \$5.00

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

## President's Letter

We started the evening with sixteen dozen glasses. This seemed adequate at the time when decisions were made. How many people could the library hold, we asked ourselves and came up with the satisfactory number of one hundred and fifty. Would that number of people come out at 6.30 on a late winter night, with a cold wind writhing around their legs and hands? Well, probably not, was the answer, but if they did we had one hundred and ninety two glasses and that should be enough.

Of course, it wasn't. We estimated later that well over two hundred East Melbournites came to the grand opening of 'Creative East Melbourne' at the library on Thursday 4 August and by 7.30 we were frantically washing glasses in order to keep up with the demand.

This was the dream of one woman: to exhibit the work of local artists and the creativity of the East Melbourne community. Lisette Malatesta began her project in May and some fifty artists responded. She organised the venue with our wonderful librarians, particularly Linda and Fiona; she arranged for professional picture hangers to mount the exhibition; she called on her suppliers to help with the food and wine, but did much of the generous catering with her own staff; she organised with her staff and some volunteers to be wait staff on the night and stayed with them to clean up afterwards.

The night was a triumph, for the artists, for Lisette, for the volunteers and for the community. What's more, she thinking of doing it again next year.

**CREATIVE EAST MELBOURNE**  
**East Melbourne Library**  
**4-31 August**

*Jill Fenwick, August 2016*

## AGM

Notice of Annual General Meeting and nomination form are enclosed with this newsletter.

All financial members of the EMHS are eligible to be nominated for the committee.

## New Members

We welcome our new members:

Margaret Sandford  
Lydia Kinda

Nerida Phillips  
John Stone

## Mrs Blair's Aborigine

In 1886 Trident won the Derby at Flemington. Lady Loch, the governor's wife, was there to slip the blue ribbon over the horse's head while a huge crowd of sumptuously dressed racegoers watched on. Carl Kahler later immortalised the moment in oils. On 22 February 1930 H P Brennan wrote an article in *The Argus* about the painting and included the following paragraph:

On the lawn, close to the winning horse, is a sturdy little figure marked on the key as "Mrs Blair's aborigine." Mrs. Blair was the wife of a Collins-street medical practitioner, and the aborigine in Eton uniform was a conspicuous figure at functions of the kind. It was said that a relative of Mrs Blair saved him just as he was about to be offered as a sacrifice in his native wilds. One wonders what became of him in after years. Did he grow tired of civilisation and «go bush,» or did he rise to the rank of a butler in some distinguished house?

The editor received a number of letters in response to the article from people who remembered the boy.

Mr. W. Murray McLean (West Wyalong) writes:-I was Lani Blair's greatest friend. He was found, I believe, at a deserted camp of aborigines in North Queensland. - Mrs. Blair had told friends of hers in that locality that she would like a "boy" for a butler, but Lani was sent to her as a child. Mrs. Blair adopted him and gave him the name of Lani Mulgrave Blair. At this time Mrs. Blair lived in Collins street, but shortly

afterward she lived very near to St. Ives private hospital, East Melbourne, which was at that time my father's residence. Lani and I attended kindergarten together and he was far above the average, his work being particularly neat and his writing excellent. Mrs. Blair later moved to St. Kilda, and Lani attended All Saints' Grammar School, where he had a splendid record. On leaving that school he was employed by a Melbourne architect. I think this record proves that he succeeded both as a scholar and an athlete. He was a cadet, and he gained a medal as a good shot, and was a good runner, and cyclist.

A more likely story of why Lani was brought to Melbourne was that Dr. Blair wanted to test "the theory that, given equal chances, the aboriginal brain would compare favourably with the 'white' brain."

Stories varied slightly on the boy's circumstances when he was found but the common thread was that he had been abandoned after a tribal fight. Miss L T James of North Fitzroy claimed that:

Lani's mother was shot dead, and he was taken from her breast while her body was yet warm. Dr. Blair told me this, but I do not know in which circumstances the shot was fired. The Mulgrave River tribe were murderers at one time, I was told, and there were raids upon them after trouble.

The boy was sent to Melbourne on a steamboat and Mrs Blair was at the wharf to collect him.

When the vessel arrived and the cargo was being put ashore, she asked the captain where was the boy. To her surprise a bag was brought, pulled in at the top, and tied with rope, from which peeped a tiny black head with large, rolling eyes. The child had not been taken out of the bag from the time the boat left Queensland.

Once in Melbourne the Blairs adopted Lani and gave him all the privileges and advantages that an eminent doctor's income could provide. Lani led a happy life playing in the local parks with his friends and his dog, a Scotch terrier named Donald Dinnie, under the watchful eye of his nurse. He spent holidays and weekends with the Blairs at their house, Blairgowrie, in Sorrento, where he was habitually dressed in a sailor suit.

The kindergarten that Murray McLean (and two of his siblings) and Lani Mulgrave Blair attended was run by Miss Violet Neild, the daughter of another well-known doctor. It started in 1885 in Holy Trinity Hall, Hotham Street, but within a few months moved to Lauriston Cottage, Wellington Parade on the corner of Powlett Street (now 7-Eleven) and moved again in 1890 to 53 George Street (coincidentally the same house that Fergus Hume had rented two years earlier (1886-1888)). Melbourne Punch commented on the occasion of the kindergarten's first



Detail from *The Derby Day At Flemington, 1887* Carl Kahler.  
VRC Collection

annual distribution of prizes, that:

There are only two other institutions of a similar character in Melbourne, and that in East Melbourne, conducted by Miss Violet Neild, although only in existence a little over a year, numbers now some forty pupils, with increasing prospects. The Kindergarten system, which has been so successful in Germany, from whence it takes its rise, and other continental cities, has for its object the teaching of children from their very earliest years by the most simple and impressionable methods. Thus, children too young to be sent to school, and often considered an incumbrance at home, are gradually prepared, and the seeds of knowledge gently sown, so that upon their advent into school life they may at once take a comparatively high position.



In 1889 Lani, then aged about ten, won the prize for writing, and again in 1890 when he was given a special prize of a writing desk. Obviously Miss Neild's school also provided junior grades.

Dr Blair had died in 1887 and Mrs Blair moved from Collins Street with Lani, to a house newly built in Wellington Parade, on the corner of Berry Street, now No. 39. She lived there until about 1893 and Lani became a familiar and popular figure in the area. He became a splendid cricketer and 'he first played for the Sunbeams cricket team, East Melbourne, of which club the late Sir William Clarke was president'.

After moving to St Kilda and attending school there he was apprenticed to the architect, Sydney H Wilson, who declared that 'he had considerable skill in drawing'

It seemed that Dr Blair's theory was proven but the experiment was cut tragically short when Lani, in pursuit of yabbies, went swimming in Albert Park Lake, causing him to catch a chill. This turned to pneumonia and he died on 16 January 1900.

He was said to be an affectionate boy, was well-liked among his school friends, and deeply loved by his adoptive parents, but we will never know what Lani thought about living a life so isolated from his own people.

*Sylvia Black*

## When a Win is Also a Loss: The Freemasons' Hospital Development

On Tuesday 21 June, Sylvia and I attended a meeting called by the Melbourne City Council to air the numerous protests about the proposed new building on the Freemasons site fronting Grey Street. What was proposed was a ten storey structure, mainly glass, with a four storey podium facing Grey Street and above the podium, a six storey tower. In all, the height of the tower and the building and services plant would be 42.922 metres tall, where the discretionary height for this heritage listed area is 35 metres. Other complaints were to do with traffic, parking, building noise and rubbish removal access.

The decision of Council was to lower the overall height of the tower by two storeys. This was a partial win for the protestors, but still a loss to East Melbourne. It will be the only freestanding tower in the area, to be followed by a second tower fronting Albert Street, intruding into the historical and heritage character of the neighbourhood. And just as the Hilton Hotel became the basis of the argument for other towers along Clarendon Street, the Freemasons tower threatens the loss of other buildings as developers argue that one good tower deserves another three, four or more.

# The Lion of Athens

With current attention firmly fixed on the Olympic Games and it being 120 years since the first modern Olympics it seems appropriate to pay tribute to Edwin 'Teddy' Harold Flack, dual gold medallist in Athens in 1896, and a resident of East Melbourne, living for many years at Cliveden Mansions.

Flack was born in Islington, East London in 1873, and arrived in Melbourne with his family as a one year old. The family settled in South Yarra, and Flack attended Melbourne Grammar. He left school in 1892 and joined his father's accountancy firm. In March 1895 he went to London to gain experience with his father's old firm, Price, Waterhouse & Co., chartered accountants (whom he later represented in Australia), and graduated F.C.P.A. and F.S.A.A.

He was already a successful runner in Australia but, according to Ron Clarke writing in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, 'newspaper reports of his presence in Athens for the revived Olympic Games in 1896, at which Australia was not officially represented, came as a surprise to his family who learned that he had taken a month's holiday.' This was five years before federation and Australia was still a collection of colonies with no national identity. Flack chose to race in the colours of his old school. He won the 800 metres in a time of 2:11.9, and the 1500 metres in 4:33.2 against the French and American



favourites. Now the world records are 1:40.91 and 3:26.00 respectively. He remains the only Australian male to win two gold medals for track and field events at the one Olympics. To quote Ron Clarke again, 'For the rest of the week Flack was treated like royalty. A friend said, 'Why, you're the lion of all Athens'. He left for London to the accompaniment of bands and waving flags.

He worked with Price Waterhouse for another three years before returning to Melbourne and the family home in 1899. He did not continue competitive running. In 1917 Flack bought a country property, Burnbank, near Berwick, and turned it into a

Continued

first class Friesian cattle stud. During the week he continued to work in the family firm which grew to have offices interstate and in New Zealand. It merged with Price Waterhouse in 1946. In 1924 his mother died and the South Yarra house, which he used as his weekday address, was sold. From this time Flack rented an apartment at Cliveden Mansions (site of the Pullman Hotel). He died in 1935 at Mount St Evin's Private Hospital in Fitzroy (now replaced by St Vincent's Private).

## Restoration Home

The ABC's Restoration Australia is looking for heritage projects to film in 2016.

Fremantle Media are very excited to be producing the next two series' of the ABC's hugely popular Restoration Australia.

They are currently looking for historically significant projects starting restoration between September-December 2016, to be completed within 18 months.

If you or a client have a building dating between 1815 – 1960 and are about to embark on its restoration, they'd love to hear from you.

The size and budget doesn't matter but passion and history does.

To find out more please contact: [restoration.australia@fremantlemedia.com.au](mailto:restoration.australia@fremantlemedia.com.au)

## Coming Activities

Wednesday, 19 October, at 8.00 p.m.

### Victorian Gardens

Justin Buckley is head of horticulture at the National Trust and has acquired specialized knowledge of gardens in the Victorian era, especially plants commonly used. He will share some of this knowledge with us in a talk which will take place immediately following our AGM.

At Clarendon Terrace, 210 Clarendon Terrace, East Melbourne

Monday, 5 December at 6.30 –  
Christmas Drinks

Put it in your diary now and please note this will be a Monday and not our usual Wednesday. More details later.

### Cover Image:

Creative East Melbourne launch,  
4 August 2016.

Photo by Tristan Davies