

Cemetery Conversations



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF ST. KILDA CEMETERY INC.

CHRISTINA MACPHERSON (1864-1936)

by Patricia Convery

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Fame came early to Christina MacPherson. In April 1865, Mad Dan Morgan, one of Australia's most notorious and sadistic bushrangers and a man who had a reward of £1,000 on his head, rode up to the MacPherson property of Peechelba in Northern Victoria, introduced himself and ordered the family into the homestead dining-room.

After having eaten well, he became relaxed and drowsy enough to let his guard down. When baby Christina cried, the nursemaid Alice MacDonald, was allowed to go to her in the nursery. Alice immediately slipped from the house and ran to a nearby home to get help. At daylight, as Dan, still in drowsy good-humour, slipped out of the house, he was ambushed, shot and killed.

The MacPherson family had come to Victoria from Scotland in 1854 and had taken up land in northern Victoria and New South Wales before moving to Dagworth Station near Winton in Queensland. The family however spent a lot of time in Victoria.

It was while visiting her married sister at Camperdown that Christina attended the Warrnambool races, in April 1894. Here Christina heard for the first time the old Scottish ballad "Thou Bonnie Wood O'Craigielea", which the

town band had arranged as a march. Later that same year Christina journey north to Dagworth, the family's property. Her old school friend Sarah Riley and Sarah's fiancée, Banjo Paterson, came to visit her.

A few months before this, the last great incident of the shearers' strike of 1894 occurred, the striking shearers burnt down the Dagworth woolshed, killing more than 100 lambs. Hoffmeister, one of the ringleaders of the strike, with a reward of £1,000 on his head, had become the most wanted man in the country. It was perhaps for this reason he committed suicide by shooting himself. Three policeman and Bob MacPherson (Christina's brother) rode to the waterhole, the scene of the suicide, to view the body.

There was no piano at Dagworth, but an autoharp (a zither-like instrument) on which Christina continually played the tune she had heard at the Warrnambool races. Banjo Paterson began thinking about putting words to this tune. What better subject could he use than the local event that had so recently occurred.

So was born our national song "Waltzing Matilda".

Sarah Riley, so it is claimed, broke off her engagement to



Grave of Christina Macpherson at the St. Kilda General Cemetery (Pres "D" 250)



Plaque on Christina Macpherson's grave. It was placed there by the Baillieu family, relatives of the MacPhersons

Paterson because of his growing friendship with Christina. Bob MacPherson even went so far as to chase Paterson off his property at gunpoint, because of this dalliance.

Neither girl ever spoke to the other again and neither girl ever married.

Christina MacPherson died in Melbourne in 1936, aged 72, having received no money and little recognition for the song.

(Source: Notes by Pearl Donald and Kay Rowan)

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THE EXTRAORDINARY STEPHEN FAMILY—A LEGAL DYNASTY

In the previous newsletter we looked at the life of the abolitionist, Sir George Stephen. In this issue we look at Sir George and Lady Stephen's descendants and members of their extended family. Sir George and Lady Henrietta Stephen were to have seven children:-

James Wilberforce Stephen (10/4/1822 – 14/8/1881). Studied law and came to Australia with his wife, Katherine Rose Vernon and his parents. Practised law and lectured at the University of Melbourne. Entered politics as the MLA for St. Kilda in 1870. Appointed Attorney-General in 1872. A notable aspect of his parliamentary career was that he shepherded the important 1872 Education Bill through parliament, thereby ensuring 'free, compulsory and secular' education for the young. This was despite the views of his father, Sir George, who was highly critical of secular education. James Wilberforce resigned from parliament in 1874 to become a puisne judge of the Supreme Court. He died suddenly on 14 August 1881, survived by his wife, a son and three of his five daughters. He is buried in the Church of England Compartment "C" Grave 404 and 406 of St. General Kilda Cemetery. Also interred at this location are his wife Katherine Rose and a number of their children.

Henrietta Sibella Priscilla (Pussy) Stephen (16/2/1824 – 8/4/1903). Buried at St. Kilda Cemetery with her parents Sir George and Lady Stephen.

William Ravenscroft Stephen (2/3/1826 – 28/6/1899). One source claims that he was 'Head of Treasury' when the Victorian Government was formed. William Ravenscroft Stephen came to Australia on the *Great Britain* in 1852, meeting his future wife (Mary Anne Sarah Walkden) on the voyage. They were married at Christ Church, Church of England in St. Kilda in February 1853. William and his wife are buried in St. Kilda General Cemetery (CofE "D" 327).

George Milner Elmslie Stephen (3/4/1828 – 2/9/1881) George Milner Elmslie Stephen was a Clerk in the Customs office and had been Inspector of Distilleries at the time of his death which occurred a fortnight after that of his elder brother James Wilberforce Stephen. He married Anne Atkinson Bell in Auckland New Zealand on 12 September 1850. George Milner Elmslie Stephen died as a result of injuries sustained in a railway accident on 30 August 1881 when the 8.54 AM train from Brighton Beach was hurled down an embankment near Jolimont. He died at the Melbourne Hospital of his injuries, three days after the accident. He left a widow

and eleven children between the ages of 10 and 27. The following March, the executors of his estate were awarded £3,000 in damages against the Board of Land and Works over the accident. The accident, which claimed four lives, was the first to involve fatalities on the Victorian Railways. Also killed in the accident was Mr F F Bailliere, the Collins Street publisher of medical works and directories who is also buried at St. Kilda General Cemetery. George Milner Elmslie Stephen and his wife are buried in the same grave as his parents.

Mary Anne Sibella Stephen (29/6/1832 – 31/1/1913). Mary Anne Sibella Stephen married John Hart at St. Mary's Church of England, Caulfield on 14 September 1864. She is buried with her husband in the Church of England Compartment "C" Grave 650 at St. Kilda General Cemetery.

Selina Hastings Robe Stephen (24/8/1835 – 13/11/1841). Selina Hastings Robe Stephen died at the age of six and is buried at Bledlow, Buckinghamshire, England.

Hastings Fitz Edward Murphy Stephen (25/3/1837 – 1/1/1881) Hastings is buried in the Church of England Compartment "D" Grave 327.

...to be continued.



The grave of James Wilberforce Stephen at the St. Kilda General Cemetery (CofE "C" 404 and 406)

"The accident, which claimed four lives, was the first to involve fatalities on the Victorian Railways"



'FOR THE GOOD OF THE PUBLIC'

**"We came along
to see you
because we are
in dire straights
about the St.
Kilda Cemetery"**



Grave of David Martin, Vice Chairman and Treasurer of the St. Kilda General Cemetery Trust (COE "D" 015)

In 1954, the St. Kilda Cemetery Trustees were facing dire financial difficulties. That they continued to operate alone for another decade before control passed to The Necropolis Springvale, is a credit to the Trustees. We have a record of the deputation that met The Hon. William Barry, MLA on 25 March 1954 at 295 Queen Street, Melbourne:

"Sir Archie Michaelis (Chairman): We came along to see you because we are in dire straights about the St. Kilda Cemetery. We are not asking for any financial help from the Government at the moment, but we would like to increase some of our charges. Mr. Martin has all the facts and figures, but I would like to say that I have been a member of the Trust since 1935 and the affairs of the Trust have been in very good hands over the years. I know from personal experience that things have been very carefully watched. Wages have gone up and costs have risen; our revenue is dropping and we have very few grave sites left for sale."

Minister: How many grave sites have you left?

Miss M Ellis (Secretary): Practically none.

Sir Archie: Our revenue is derived from people opening up the graves and we must raise the fees to enable us to carry on.

Minister: I have your proposed scale of fees here.

Mr D Martin (Vice Chairman and Treasurer): These figures go back to 1933, but the main trouble has been in the last 7 years, since the 31st December, 1945. In the earlier years we had a certain amount of land for sale, but this land has now been sold and, with increased wages, we find that the position is becoming such that what surplus funds we have—£9,629—will quickly be used. We have funds amounting to £16,000 paid by grave holders for perpetual maintenance. That money cannot be touched, and the interest from it does not pay much as far as upkeep is concerned.

Minister: What is your charge for perpetual graves.

Mr Martin: It varies now.

Miss Ellis: I have asked £75 for graves recently.

Mr Martin: We find, when we look at the figures for the last three years, that we have lost about £2,900. At that rate the remaining funds we have, £9,629, will be quickly used up. Miss Ellis and the curator have done everything they could to keep up the revenue. Over the years our stagg has been cut down. In 1938, we were employing 15 men; in 1952 we had 8, we are now down to 7 men and we want to keep them in

employment.

Minister: Your wages in 1952 amounted to £7,052 and now they are £7,310. You want to raise the fees a good deal, don't you?

Mr Martin: Yes, but we must increase the revenue.

Minister: I am worried about the sinking costs more than the others. I know you need an increase because of the cost of living rises.

Mr W Rowe (Secretary, Department of Health): If you have only a few grave sites left, you would not have many more sinkings.

Miss Ellis: No, but a lot of land has been bought and not used yet.

Sir Archie: Sinking a 9 feet grave means that they can get a lot of people buried there.

Minister: But you have to have it re-opened every time.

Sir Archie: But that does not cost a great deal.

Minister: The sinking of a 9 feet grave costs £20. How many people would you put into it?

Miss Ellis: Three usually, but if there is a curb on it, we could put four.

Minister: If there are three they would pay £12 for the first and that would bring the total cost up to £32.10.0.

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Sir Archie: When did we get an increase in fees?

Minister: In 1952.

Sir Archie: Well, the wages have gone up since 1948.

Minister: But when you got your new scale of fees in 1952 you were paying £7.052 for wages, last year you paid £7,310.

Miss Ellis: We should have asked for more in 1952.

Mr Martin: We are mainly concerned with the ordinary maintenance. We are not worried about the charges for sinking graves.

Minister: You have a beautiful cemetery there, and I think you keep it very well. I would hate to see it go back. That is more important than anything else.

Dr R Farnback (Senior Health Officer): The Health Commission is not very happy about these increases.

Minister: I hate to create aristocracies among cemeteries. That is what I am worried about.

Sir Archie: Practically every grave is sold and I do not think we would ever turn anybody down. If people can put up a good case why they cannot pay the costs and if they have the grave site there, we will not put up any argument. We are there for the good of the public.

Minister: I have had many requests for increased scales of fees from cemeteries all over the state, but I realise that yours is a different case.

Sir Archie: We have no more

land to sell and cannot get any income other than this.

Minister: I understand that. You were established so long ago and your scale of fees does not pay. When I see the old Melbourne Cemetery I feel very sorry, but there is nothing I can do. It is a big problem. However, I will agree to this increased scale of fees.

Sir Archie: Thank you, that will help us out for quite a while.

Minister: If you had a lot of land to sell I would not have done it, but I realise you need to increase your income."

And so the new scale of fees was gazetted on 7 April 1954.

(Source: Department of Health file on St. Kilda General Cemetery, Part III 1939-1984)

"You have a beautiful cemetery there, and I think you keep it very well. I would hate to see it go back. That is more important than anything else"

IMAGES FROM ST. KILDA CEMETERY



From left to right: Hidden amongst vegetation; a rare footstone monument with initials and year of death; the majestic Hogan monument; a flowering rose; main entrance of the Cemetery taken in April 2006

