

# Uniting Church History and Heritage

Uniting Church National History Society: Vol. 4 No. 2 June 2022

## The Renewal of the Covenant

The reconvened meeting of the 16th Assembly began with a historic renewal of the Covenant between the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), reaffirming the place of this relationship at the heart of the UCA.

Uniting Church President Rev Sharon Hollis led a liturgy of renewal together with UAICC National Interim Chairperson the Rev. Mark Kickett during the worship at the commencement of the reconvened 16th Assembly.

It was a time of both a celebration of this important commitment and a time of confession for the ways we have not honoured or lived up to the vision of the Covenant.

In gesture of deep humility, those Second Peoples who participated in the worship and all who were watching online, were invited to kneel as an Act of Confession. In reading this confession, the President said,

"Before You, and before our Congress siblings, we confess anew that we have been and continue to be complicit in the oppression of First Peoples. We took and continue to take land from its rightful custodians. We chose and continue to choose violence, subjugation, prejudice and patronising charity. We have turned a blind eye to the continued desecration of sacred places across our lands. Australia's justice system continues to discriminate against First Peoples, and the ever-increasing numbers of Indigenous deaths in custody show us that justice is yet to roll down like waters."

"And so, before You, our God, and before our First Nations siblings, we humbly seek forgiveness."

All were invited to continue this confession.

"We pray that our commitment to this Covenant will be renewed and enlivened. Kindle in us a flame for justice and equity in these lands known as Australia, and remind us to work in solidarity, shoulder to shoulder, with our First Nations siblings. May we defiantly choose love and justice over racism and fear, every day, in every decision, in every action."

## AGM and Webinar

The forthcoming Annual General Meeting of the Uniting Church National History Society will be held online via Zoom on 21 July 2022, between 4.00pm and 5.00pm Eastern Standard Time, followed by a public webinar, on 'History, Truth-Telling and the Uluru Statement from the Heart', commencing at 7.00pm.

The AGM can be accessed via Zoom at Join Zoom Meeting

<https://divinity.zoom.us/j/83344374734?pwd=K3A3Z2ppQ2ZBYW1OaS9HcGIUdkdaZz09>

Meeting ID: 833 4437 4734 Passcode: 592311

The agenda for the meeting will include the annual report of the Board and annual financial statement, the election of any new Board members, and thanks to the retiring Treasurer, Mr Bob Coote.

Details re the webinar and registration can be found on page 9.



*Denise Bowden, CEO of Yothu Yindi, signing the Uluru Statement from the Heart*



## Words from the Chair

I am currently working on a chapter for a book *Reading the Bible in Australia* which is designed as a collection of essays in appreciation for Meredith Lake's award winning book *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018). My chapter explores the echoes of biblical texts in Ned Kelly's *Jerilderie Letter* (1879). In it I argue

that Kelly was buoyed up by his success as a bandit to the point where he took the posture, not of a republican revolutionary, but of a divine avenger announcing an impending apocalypse for colonial powers who resisted his right to roam the country and redistribute its wealth at his own whim. Without any sophisticated interpretative skills or theological education, such a stance was nonetheless informed by Kelly's Catholic faith and his reading of the Douay Bible, first encountered by him while serving time in Pentridge prison in 1873.

Ned Kelly's threats aimed at 'the British Army and the Union Jack' have suggested to many a revolutionary sentiment and, indeed, the idea that Ned Kelly was planning a republican rebellion has firmly entered the Kelly legend, in spite of the nearly total lack of evidence to support the idea. The claim that when Kelly was arrested at Glenrowan, he had in his possession a draft constitution of a 'Republic of North-Eastern Victoria' has gained considerable credence since it first appeared in Max Brown's *Australian Son* in 1948. Then, in 1967, respected Kelly scholar and biographer Ian Jones presented a paper on 'A New View of Ned Kelly,' in which he raised the possibility of a republican movement in the region during Kelly's lifetime. However, no documentary evidence of this has ever been discovered in spite of extensive searching

Certainly, the social unrest, economic hardships, land wars between squatters and selectors, poorly administered land acts and police brutality and corruption in North-East Victoria in the 1870s could be seen as providing a context for republican sentiment to emerge and bubble over into armed resistance. All of this has become a popular part of the Kelly legend. The problem, again, is lack of evidence. Stuart E. Dawson, Adjunct Research Fellow in the Department of History at Monash University has debunked the entire story of a Kelly-led republican movement as a complicated historical fiction built more on wish fulfilment than any reliable evidence. The fact that neither Ned Kelly nor any of his supporters, nor the informers who gave information to the police, ever said a single word about a republic surely counts strongly against the theory. Rather than any planned political insurrection, it is more likely that Kelly was acting out of an opportunistic banditry that, coupled with his misplaced sense of self-importance, led him to adopt the guise of a figure of vengeance, a biblical prophet or even an avenging deity, advocating for the poor and threatening a swift vengeance for those who opposed him.

There is no direct quotation of Scripture in The *Jerilderie Letter*, but one may hear in it the echoes of many of the themes found in the Hebrew Scriptures—the tithe for the poor, concern for widows and orphans, ecological devastation and plagues of locusts as instrument of divine vengeance. Kelly has always loomed large in the Australian imagination meaning different things to different people. He cast himself, however, in the role of friend to the poor appearing suddenly out of the bush, "fearless, free and bold", to rain down judgment on their oppressors. He warned the readers of The *Jerilderie Letter* that failure to support oppressed widows and orphans would lead to consequences "worse than the rust in the wheat in Victoria or the [dearth] of a dry season to the grasshoppers in New South Wales". One of Sidney Nolan's celebrated Kelly paintings depicts Kelly as a massive, monstrous figure, looming over the landscape emerging from behind a mountain like an antipodean Godzilla, the stuff of nightmares.[1] "Kelly isn't only Kelly to me", Nolan said in 1964, "He's a symbol – the thing in the bush if you like." [2]

The threats of crop devastation and drought were very real in late nineteenth-century Australia. An 1889 epidemic of stem rust occurred in South Australia in 1889 which led, in attempt to address the problem to a series of intercolonial Rust in Wheat Conference in the 1890s. Wheat breeding pioneer William Farrer could find no really effective means of resistance other than to develop breeds that did better in less rust-prone areas. Stem rust was only one of several crops diseases that could decimate wheat production.

Continued on page 14



## Heat, dust, drought and flood: Living with extremes in arid Australia in the early twentieth century

### Dr Rebecca Jones

Heat, dust, drought and flood: extreme weather defines arid Australia, shaping every aspect of their lives of people who live within it.

Nurse Alice Main, who worked at Oodnadatta in far north South Australia from 1907 to 1909, wrote in her diary in January 1908:

Attended to Mrs Lloyd from Lake Harry, 20 miles away. Very bad eyes and she is nearly blind. Gave boracic acid powder and made an eye shade... Trouble is long standing and far advanced.

A few days later Alice Main wrote: "She has been using bore water and made her eyes much more painful. I bathed them with Boracic lotion every three hours". On the seventh day: "Mrs Lloyd's eyes are much improved. She was able to see and read and write for a little for the first time in many months".<sup>[1]</sup>



*Sister Latto Brett and Dr Kennedy from Hergott Springs (Maree)  
c. 1910, Australian Inland Mission Collection,  
nla.obj-142554570, National Library of Australia.*

Alice Main's diary, and the diary of her successor Mary Ann Latto Bett (known to all as Latto) who worked at Oodnadatta from 1910 to 1913, are the centrepiece of my research at the State Library of South Australia.<sup>[2]</sup> Both Sister Main and Sister Bett were trained as both Nurses and Deaconesses in Melbourne and appointed by the Presbyterian Church of South Australia to Oodnadatta. They lived in a boarding house, visiting patients with

injuries, dental problems, respiratory diseases childhood ailments and most of all eye infections, as experienced by Mrs Lloyd of Lake Harry. These nurses were possibly the only qualified health professionals based permanently in northern South Australia at that time. Their work was the precursor and model for the establishment of the Australian Inland Mission founded by John Flynn in 1911.

My research into the diaries of Alice Main and Latto Bett, is part of a project in which I am consider how, in arid areas, extreme weather effected people physically and emotionally and how people living in arid areas learned from, and adapted to these challenges. I am exploring these issues through the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, drawing on the insights gained from this historical research I will reflect on the way responses to extreme weather have changed over time and what insights historical understandings can provide for adaptation to climate change in Australia in the present and future.



*Sister Grace Bayley outside the Oodnadatta AIM  
Nursing Hospital in 1932, Oodnadatta Collection, B  
50497, State Library of South Australia.*

I am exploring these issues through the papers of the Australian Inland Mission (or AIM) and its offshoot the Flying Doctor Service in the State Library of South Australia, the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales. through the first half of the twentieth century The Australian Inland Mission, (or AIM as it was known) was formed under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church in 1911. The AIM had a social reformist agenda for improving the physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being of settlers in remote areas. The organisation was based around a series of small

nursing hospitals, the first of which was in Oodnadatta opened in 1911. These hospitals provided inpatient and outpatients care, health education and social support. It also supported roving clergy and, from the late 1920s, fly in fly out doctors—AIM nurses had general nursing as well as midwifery qualifications but, unlike Sisters Main and Bett, did not have religious qualifications.



*Nurses in the dispensary at Oodnadatta AIM Nursing Hospital, Australian Inland Mission Collection, nla-obj-142319903k National Library of Australia.*

The Australian Inland Mission should not be confused with an unrelated evangelising organisation, the Aborigines' Inland Mission, later renamed Australian Indigenous Missions (using the same acronym) run by a branch of the Baptist church—whose work was conversion and education of Indigenous people—a very different organisation with different goals.

Although the Australian Inland Mission and Flying Doctor service were established principally to support British and European settlers in remote areas, people who were still in the process of learning to live with the extremes of the remote inland, I have calculated that about one quarter of the patients who attended the AIM nursing hospitals at Oodnadatta, Innamincka and Beltana between the mid-1920s and mid-1940s were Indigenous with a small number of Chinese and so called "Afghans".

My research focuses on AIM activities in northern South Australia and south western Queensland, specifically the regions around Oodnadatta, Beltana in the northern Flinders



*Inside the ward at Oodnadatta, c. 1912–1922, Rev. Robert Mitchell collection, PRG 1610/11/221, State Library of South Australia.*

Ranges and Innamincka and Birdsville in the Channel country where the organisation established some of their earliest and longest-running nursing hospitals. I am also researching the early Flying Doctor activities based at Broken Hill which serviced this area as well as far western New South Wales. This region has a hot arid, climate with intermittent droughts, heat waves, occasional floods and regular dust storms. Residents were engaged in pastoralism, mining, settlement services such as stores and police, and long-distance transport by railway, droving and carting using camels, horses, donkeys, bullocks and later diesel trucks.

So much has been written about John Flynn, the AIM and the Flying Doctor Service. Most of this, with the exception of work by historian Brigid Hains, has been celebratory organisational histories, biographies of key players (such as John Flynn) and descriptions of novel technological achievements such as wireless communication and aviation. By contrast I am using Australian Inland Mission and Flying Doctor Service archival material as social commentary on the lives and experiences of people who routinely experience extreme weather such as heat, drought, flood and dust storms, to gain insights into the physical and emotional impact of major weather events and explore adaptation and mal-adaptation to extremes.

The AIM and Flying Doctor archives are ideal sources because of the holistic nature of the organisation itself: it was concerned with medical, emotional *and* social wellbeing and the records are very diverse. They include

health records and statistics including diagnoses and treatment; details of public health education programs in remote areas; official and personal correspondence, personal diaries; photographs; maps; and details of social gatherings and programs. Nurses were involved with most aspects of the wellbeing of inlanders: they attended their physical health and they provided emotional support in times of distress particularly for women. They facilitated social interaction, particularly for women and children, through sewing and reading groups, Christmas parties and open house and they conducted Sunday school and burial ceremonies when a clergyman was not available. All of these activities were discussed in their monthly reports and correspondence.



*Relaxing on the lawn outside the Oodnadatta nursing hospital, photograph by Sister A.S. Hill, c.1939–1941, Australian Inland Mission Collection, nla.obj-142249037, National Library of Australia.*

While all of these sources enrich my understanding of living with extreme weather in the first half of the twentieth century, personal diaries and correspondence provide an exceptional insight into the way AIM nurses themselves experienced extreme weather. These detailed accounts of these women's thoughts and feelings, the patients they attended, the places they visited and the community activities in which they participated, provide an extraordinary window into the lived experience of extreme weather in this period, grounded in particular local environments. Through this, we can gain a picture of the human face of climate impact and adaptation. My previous research into drought suggests that long term adaptation to extreme weather is enabled by the way we live our everyday lives: our houses, the social

and economic conditions under which we live, the way we modify our local environment, the infrastructure and resources to which we have access, and our cultural understandings. Through the diverse records of the AIM and Flying Doctor Service I can gain insight into the effects of extreme weather as well as the social conditions which facilitated or hindered adaptation.

I am exploring a number of health effects directly or indirectly influenced by weather events. These include eye diseases, the direct effect of heat, gastric diseases, nutritional deficiencies, vector borne diseases such as malaria and mental health effects

I'll talk briefly about two of these, heat and eyes.

## Heat

Heat is perhaps the most obvious health effect in arid regions of Australia. Extreme heat was not only uncomfortable, but a danger to health and nurses regularly treated heat exhaustion, heat stroke and dehydration. For example, Alice Main treated a woman in January 1908 who was found unconscious on the railway line near Oodnadatta in the height of summer. She was in no danger of injury from the train which travelled on the line only once a fortnight but, being summer, she was suffering from extreme heat exposure and dehydration and was close to death when located.<sup>[3]</sup>



*Bluey Holes, an outstation of Cordillo Downs in north eastern South Australia, c.1922–1935, Cordillo Downs Collection, B 71652/16, State Library of South Australia.*

Living conditions played an important role in enhancing or ameliorating the impact of heat. In remote areas, most residents had to rely on materials that were locally available, or could be



easily and cheaply transported. Pisè (rammed earth) and stone provided good heat insulation. However, by the interwar years corrugated iron and flattened kerosene tins was the most ubiquitous building material in remote areas. Imported to Australia since the mid-19th century then manufactured locally from 1915, corrugated iron (actually steel) was easily transportable, termite resistant and the material of choice for cheap construction. However, these building concentrated heat, braising occupants in their own juices. Swamp Cane grass was a building material much better suited to hot climates. It was readily and locally available, growing on the watercourses and clay pans of the Cooper and Diamantina Rivers; it was easy to transport and provided efficient insulation.



*Station buildings in south western Queensland, c.1930, B 47089, E.L. Walpole collection, State Library of South Australia.*

This station in south western Queensland, photographed in employed a variety of building materials: the house and store made of stone, a cane grass chapel and house extension, with the detached kitchen made of iron, flanked by a thatched, open air dining area.

Buildings developed interesting design adaptations to reduce heat. The purpose-built Innamincka AIM nursing hospital, which opened in 1929, copied some heat reducing features from the AIM hospital at Alice Springs. It had wide overhanging verandahs which provided shade and outdoor sleeping areas, a raised lantern ceiling with vented hot air, and a cellar through which cooled air was drawn. The Alice Springs hospital also used wet hessian bags as a basic form of evaporative cooling.

Elizabeth Burchill, an AIM nurse at Innamincka in the early 1930s described the 'cool shelters' which were ubiquitous on pastoral stations in the area. It was a spacious timber framed structure with roof and walls made of wire netting, leaves and branches. Water (if ample

supplies were available) was run along perforated guttering dribbling down the walls and as breezes passed through the wet branches, they cooled the occupants.<sup>[4]</sup>



*AIM nursing hospital at Innamincka under construction in 1928, Presbyterian Church of South Australia, PRG 123/1186 outside, State Library of South Australia.*

People on the fringes of society had much less ability to adapt to extreme weather. These people with irregular, seasonal and itinerant work and those without employment, including many Indigenous people who lived in station or town camps. Without access to money, land or reliable transport these people had very little control over their living conditions.



*Huts made from salvaged iron at an Aboriginal camp in the late 1920s, Ruby Hyde collection, B 70884-36, State Library of South Australia.*

Most itinerant workers such as drovers, tank and bore sinkers, fencers, transporters and their families lived in tents or rudimentary huts made from scavenged material usually without fresh drinking water or toilet facilities. Shearers were an exception, and by the interwar years they enjoyed better accommodation due to the collective influence of the Australian Workers Union.



*Temporary workers' camp at Angepena Station in the northern Flinders Ranges, c.1930, E.L. Walpole collection, B 47089/219, State Library of South Australia.*

## Eyes

The second health issue that I will talk about today is eye infections. Eye infections were the most common disease diagnosed by AIM nurses. A 1907 a study of nearly 2000 non aboriginal children in Western Queensland found that over 14% were affected by serious eye disease and in 1911, of sixty young men attending an army medical examination in Port Augusta, 16% were rejected due to trachoma.

<sup>[5]</sup> A nurse working for the Flying Doctor Service in this area found that at the start of the 1950s, 50% of people in this region had eye infections, 30% of these severely.<sup>[6]</sup>

Described variously as conjunctivitis or ophthalmia or by colourful names such as sandy blight and bung eye, eye infections were debilitating and painful: red, swollen, watery eyes which feel gritty and burning, exuding pus and sensitive to light. Indigenous people described conjunctivitis as 'fire and sand in the eye'. Henry Lawson poetically wrote of "crouching and groaning in the darkest corner of a hut, tortured by the demon of sandy blight", in his essay "A Vision of Sandy Blight".<sup>[7]</sup> In extreme cases of trachoma (known as blinding scourge), people's eyelids became deformed, turning inwards which led to scarring the cornea and eventually, to blindness. Hippocrates described a trachoma eyelid as like a 'cut, ripe fig'. AIM nurses in northern South Australia noted the number of both adults and children who were blind or almost blind, many of these requiring another person to guide them.

Sister Jean Finlayson, an AIM nurse at Oodnadatta in 1914–1915 following Nurse Latto Bett, recounted the gruesome story of a man with severe eye infection living north of Oodnadatta. Sister

## Current UCNHS Board members

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## NEW TREASURER NEEDED!

**Bob is retiring at the end of June and we hope to be able to hear from a volunteer! Please contact our President, Glen O'Brien, at [glenaobrien@gmail.com](mailto:glenaobrien@gmail.com).**

## NATURE'S HELICOPTER THE DRAGONFLY

Hither and thither,  
To and fro,  
Up and down,  
I go.

Flit off again,  
To a sudden stop,  
Hover still,  
Dart off,  
Trace the figure eight  
In the air,  
Above the garden grass.

Rainbow colours  
Shimmer on each wing:  
Harbinger of the summer season,  
In my heart I sing.  
(Ian Higgins, June 2022)

Finlayson telegraphed instructions but the man rode the 560km for treatment by at the AIM hospital in Oodnadatta, a journey of eleven days. When he arrived, his eyeball had ruptured and he was immediately sent by train to Adelaide.<sup>[8]</sup>

There is debate among medical historians and anthropologists about the presence of trachoma among Indigenous people prior to European invasion, with William Dampier making an ambiguous reference to eye infections on the northern WA coast in 1688.<sup>[9]</sup> Certainly, eye infections were brought by very early settlers to the Australian east coast.

In the nineteenth century, eye infections were a problem in towns and cities as well rural areas. However, by the early twentieth century as sanitation, hygiene and housing improved in cities and closely settled areas, eye infections became the particular curse of the arid inland, the agonies shared by Indigenous people and settlers alike.

The glare of sunlight, blowing sand and dust, were a source of constant irritation as airborne grit lacerated the delicate conjunctiva covering the eyeball, allowing bacteria to enter. High temperatures and pastoralism encouraged the proliferation of flies which breed in dung—cow, sheep, horse, human. *Musca vetustissima*, or bushflies, are the astonishingly persistent scourge of the inland. They crawl into eyes, noses and mouths feasting on proteins, salts and carbohydrates in our tears and saliva and spreading infections as the move from face to face.

Bathing and washing faces, hands, clothes and bedding was one of the most important factors in reducing eye infections. However, this was a challenge for many residents of arid areas. Beyond Broken Hill, reticulated water was unknown in the first half of the twentieth century. The majority of people drew domestic water from ground tanks or waterholes which are dependent on scarce rainfall and vulnerable to depletion. During drought in the mid-1920s, I have calculated that 68% of patients attending the AIM hospitals at Oodnadatta, Beltana,

**Future date claimer**

## ***4<sup>th</sup> Uniting Church National History Conference***

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> August to Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023**

**The conference will begin on Thursday evening and conclude on Sunday afternoon.**

**It will be held in Darwin, Northern Territory.**

**The theme for the conference is:**

### ***Truth Telling: from Colonising to Covenanting***

**Look for further details in future issues of our newsletter.**

**Plan to come and participate,  
then stay to explore the Top End in the dry season.**

Innaminka and Birdsville had eye infections. When water had to be carted, washing created extra labour for men as well as women and therefore only the essential was washed. Even hand washing became a luxurious event.



*Eye drill at Beltana school, 1951, Australian Inland Mission collection, MS 5574, National Library of Australia.*



For the first four decades of the twentieth century, treatment for eye infections was limited to remedies such as boracic acid, a mild antiseptic which is still used in eye drops today and blue vitriol (made from copper sulphate), a treatment recommended by Hippocrates. Nurse Elizabeth Burchill noted that Aboriginal women at Innamincka treated their babies' inflamed eyes with drops of breast milk, a practice which London ophthalmologists noted was also used among West

Indian mothers in the 1970s.<sup>[101](#)</sup> AIM nurses developed school programs to treat conjunctivitis. During summer months, September to May, Beltana school children bathed their eyes twice daily using two teaspoons of boracic acid in a pint of water. Beltana nurses checked this eye drill weekly and many people also wore face nets covering their eyes and noses.

From the early 1950s sulphur drugs and later antibiotics contributed significantly to the decline of eye infections in remote areas. While drugs played an important part in treating these diseases, one of the biggest factors in the prevention of eye infections since the early 1950s has been improvement in living standards. The end of the long 1940s drought, prosperity brought by the

wool and beef boom of the early 1950s, the proliferation of truck transport after the war, better housing and water supplies all significantly improved living conditions for many people in the Inland. Control of eye infections became possible and today, trachoma is *almost* unknown in most of Australia. Scandalously, however, remote Aboriginal communities in parts of Central and northern Australia remain the only places in the developed world where trachoma remains endemic. The reasons these communities still suffer from trachoma today is exactly the same reasons that settlers suffered in the first half of the twentieth century: poor housing and poor access to clean water.

We tend to think of living conditions and insulation from weather extremes as continually improving over time, as we gain access to new technologies and greater disposable income. I would say that all of us here have ready access to washing machines, dishwashers, hand basins and daily showers, treated water at the turn of a tap, cooling devices for summer and heating for winter, municipal sewerage treatment and fresh food at

### Uniting Church National History Society Newsletter

Contributions to this newsletter are welcome, but please send them via email and in MS Word or Apple Pages format only.

Editor: Robert Renton

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### **“History, Truth Telling, and The Uluru Statement from the Heart” - a webinar from the UC National History Society on Thursday 21 July 2022, 7–8.30 pm.**

The Uluru Statement from the Heart has been invoked by the newly elected Labor government, which has been celebrated by some as a sign of hope and reconciliation. The Statement has wide, but not universal, support from First Nations communities. It is framed in terms of a specific historical period – ‘from the Creation, according to the common law from “time immemorial,” and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.’

In this online webinar, The Uniting Church National History Society in association with the University of Divinity, will bring together Indigenous leaders and historians to discuss the significance of this historical framing. The panel will engage in a respectful and robust discussion around the Statement and explore the place of history and truth telling in working toward that Makarrata which is the ‘coming together after a struggle’ for the sake of a more just and self-determined future for First Nations people.

The webinar is an appropriate extension of the Uniting Church 16th Assembly’s renewing, in May 2022, of the Covenant between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

**To register, please go to <https://vox.divinity.edu.au/event/history-truth-telling-and-the-ururu-statement-from-the-heart/>**

Panel members will be Rev. Mark Kickett, UAICC Interim Chair; Nathan Tyson, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement Manager, NSW/ACT Synod; Rev. Emily Hayes, UCA Minister, Alice Springs; and Dr Laura Rademaker, ANU Historian and author; chaired by Assoc.Professor Glen O’Brien.

the opening of a refrigerator. Extreme heat and dust storms cause discomfort but we have considered ourselves largely insulated from direct threats to health.

However, today, climate change is exaggerating extreme weather, cheaply constructed housing proliferates and some remote Indigenous communities still don't have access to reliable water and adequate housing. Are these AIM nurses' accounts salutatory? For people living in arid areas of Australia, only 70 years ago, heat and dry defined every aspect of life and the difference between comfortable, uncomfortable and seriously dangerous was slight.

<sup>[11]</sup> Diary of Alice Main, 15 January to 5 February 1908, Presbyterian Church of South Australia Collection, SRG 123220, State Library of South Australia.

<sup>[12]</sup> In the State Library of South Australia the principal archive is: Presbyterian Church of South Australia, SRG123; in the National Library of Australia the principal archive is: Uniting Church in Australia, Frontier Services M5574 as well as the records of associated individuals; in the State Library of New South Wales the principal archive is: The Royal Flying Doctor Service MLM558935, MLM55 7440 and 8669. Other relevant records are held in the State Library of Queensland and State Library of Western Australia.

<sup>[13]</sup> Diary of Alice Main, 26–28 January 1908, Presbyterian Church of South Australia collection, SRG 123 220, State Library of South Australia.

<sup>[14]</sup> Elizabeth Burchill, *Innaminka* (Melbourne: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 77.

<sup>[15]</sup> J.L.H. Cumpston, *Health and Diseases in Australia*, M.J. Lewis (Ed.) (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), 373–4.

<sup>[16]</sup> Papers of Myra Blanch, Royal Flying Doctor Service of New South Wales, MLM558935.

<sup>[17]</sup> Henry Lawson, "A Vision of Sandy Blight", in *On the Track* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1900), 18–25.

<sup>[18]</sup> J.C. Finlayson, *Life and Journeyings in Central Australia* (Victoria: J.C. Finlayson, 1925), 26.

<sup>[19]</sup> Hugh R. Taylor, *Trachoma: a blinding scourge from the Bronze Age to the twenty-first century* (Melbourne: Centre for Eye Research, 1908), 233.

<sup>[10]</sup> Elizabeth Burchill, 128.

**Dr Rebecca Jones** is a Fellow of History Council of South Australia, an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of the Inland, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University. She is currently working on "Crazy Weather: the physical and emotional impact of extreme weather in settler-colonial societies".

**Acknowledgements:** This talk was given at the State Library of South Australia on the 30 March 2022 as part of Dr Jones' Fellowship with the History Council of South Australia. Dr Jones thanks the History Council and the Marsden Szwarchord Foundation and the National Library of Australia.

## **Book review: *Mischief, Morse Code and Ministry* by Ruth Delbridge**

This book is what it says it is: a combined biography of the Rev. Reg Delbridge 1888–1964, his wife May (1885–1949) and account of their antecedents and families. The reviewer found it interesting because many of the places mentioned and some of the experiences are part of his family story too.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is an autobiography written by Reg which takes the story up to his enlistment in the AIF in 1917. The second is a family history of May. The third is an account of Reg's ministries from 1919 to his retirement in 1950.

The first part describes Reg's childhood in a middle-class family in Rochester. He came from a Methodist and teetotal family although he had relatives who were brewers. He entered the Post Office as a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist. His social life was absorbed by his church and his workmates, male and female. Parts of the story bring to mind H.G. Wells' novels of the period *The History of Mr Polly*, and *Kipps* with employees working long hours, families paying for apprenticeships as drapers, and taking walking and bicycle holidays with friends.

Reg became a lay preacher at the age of fourteen and was accompanied by monitors as he went to outlying small churches to preach. In 1912 the Queensland Methodist Church advertised in England for young men with lay preacher experience who were willing to service as home missionaries in outback Queensland. They were promised ordination after three years. Reg applied and was accepted but had to raise his own passage money. His experiences as Home Missionary involved living in church vestries, and travel to outlying preaching places and visitations on horseback or bicycle. This was similar to my father's experience twenty years later, in much the same areas, as a Presbyterian Home Missionary.

In 1917 Reg volunteered for the AIF and became a signaller in the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division on the Western Front. He added radio to his morse code skills. He married May, an old sweetheart who had also worked in the Post Office, and the pair returned to Australia in 1919 on a bride ship.

The second part of the book is conventional family history with genealogical tables outlining May's ancestry. The author has filled in gaps by researching secondary sources on what life was like in the nineteenth century. There is a lot of 'would haves' and 'could haves.' A feature of May's genealogy was redoubtable women whose husbands died in their thirties leaving them with seven children to bring up. They did this by taking in boarders. Many of the children became pupil teachers. One notable item was the incidence of 'telegraphist's cramp' in women telegraphists (May was a telegraphist). This reappeared in the 1980s with word-processing as 'repetitive strain injury' (RSI).

The third part of the book is based on family letters, memories, and church newspapers. It describes Reg and May's ministries. He was ordained when he returned in 1919, without having to study at Kings College and retired in 1950. During that time, they were rotated by the Queensland Methodist Conference around nine circuits: Emerald, Rockhampton, Kingaroy, Childers, Paddington, Hamilton, East Ipswich, Ashgrove, and finally Stanthorpe. Of these three were in Brisbane, Paddington, Hamilton and Ashgrove, and the rest rural. Incumbency was for three years, at most four, and the family of four boys lived in parsonages



### Old Woman

And so she ages by the day  
The threads that wove the fabric of her mind  
Fray one by one and will not mend.

Once she was beautiful, and knew it,  
Once her blood's fire burned in a man's veins  
Night after night, and her colours  
Enflamed the coals of his heart.

Who may see that now,  
When the nurses bring her things and swear  
Behind her back because she cannot hold  
A spoon, or manage the stairs?

Inside her yet, beneath the autumn wrinkled face  
She lies, the girl she was; the dreams, the dance,  
the light,  
Not dead, but sleeping, still alive and clear  
To those who know how to look beneath the skin.

(Kenneth Steven)



furnished by the congregation. Packing for moves became a fine art. Ministry was a family business and their four boys had to negotiate the expectations of their parents, the congregation, and what was required to be accepted by their peers. There were frequent changes of school.

There were large Sunday Schools, youth groups (the Order of Knights for boys and Comrades for girls), Christian Endeavour, tennis courts, sports clubs, youth camps, choirs, church picnics, church concerts, women's guilds, street stalls, fetes, and flower shows opened by local VIPs. Churches were one of the centres of community social life. Reg was an early ham radio operator, utilising the skills he had learned in the army. With a radio operator's licence, he built and upgraded his own equipment. In addition to chatting with ships at sea and enthusiasts in others states and countries he used it as method of missional outreach with talks and music. The radio station was set up in each parsonage until it was closed down at the outbreak of World War II. Reg also conducted many of his own choirs with occasional wins at eisteddfods.

There are fond memories of church members, some of them difficult people, but with frequent moves, most, but not all, friendships were ephemeral. A few were kept alive with letters and family visits. This compensated for the absence of any relatives in Australia, they were all in England. Reg remained an Englishman from Kent. May died in 1949, and Reg retired in 1950 but provided 'supply' for some years afterwards. He returned to England briefly for six weeks to catch up with relatives, met a widow and remarried. He died in 1964 and his second wife two years later. One of his sons entered the Methodist ministry.

The book is profusely illustrated with pictures of family, church events, parsonages, and a large number of the wooden churches typical of Queensland well into the 1960s. How many still exist? The books describe a time, that for many was golden age, but for most is no more, except in the immigrant churches of the Pacific Islanders and Koreans.

Ruth Delbridge, *Mischief, Morse Code & Ministry: One Family's Generational Saga, Stretching from England to Outback Queensland, of Life, Loss, and the Legacies of Love* (Self-Published, 2011) Winner of the Family History Book Award 2013. **Review by Ben Skerman**

## **Book review: Charles Strong's Australian Church: Christian Social Activism, 1885–1917**

This collection of scholarly and readable essays is both tribute to and analytical of the ethos, achievements and legacy of Charles Strong's Australian Church. It identifies the influence of a progressive strand of religious thought and practice that was woven into the social and political liberalism of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It also demonstrates, through fine-grained analysis of various activities undertaken by members of the Australian Church network, that it was "repeatedly torn between its more progressive analysis of social ills and the lingering tendency to attribute poverty to individual failings". (Maddox, p.39) This interplay of contested ideas is not limited to the Australian Church. It was a complicating factor in the implementation of every kind of social reform and public policy at the time, and has characterised the divergent analyses and assessments subsequently offered by historians. The recognition and exploration of this complexity is one of the strengths of the book.

Founded in 1887 by dissident Melbourne Presbyterian, the Rev. Charles Strong, the Australian Church aspired to be 'national' in the sense of "being identified with the body politic in all its struggles and aspirations ... to identify itself with every new form of thought, to sympathise with every new struggle between class and class, labor and capital". (Strong, 1887) While always remaining unapologetically Christian, the Australian Church was also non-doctrinaire and non-creedal, with membership open to anyone committed to its social and political goals, regardless of religious affiliation. It attracted mainly upper and middle class thinkers and activists from across the political spectrum, but also sought links and alliances with trade unionists and workers.

Marion Maddox locates the genesis of Strong's middle class radicalism and social activism within nineteenth century British idealism, noting especially the influences of Edward and John Caird, and T.H. Green. British idealism stressed the obligation of the state to provide citizens with opportunities to "lead the best life possible"

(Green, 1917), and advocated reform that was driven by justice rather than charity, and gave more weight to structural than to individual causes of poverty and barriers to self-actualisation. Wayne Hudson identifies Strong's Australian experience and his ongoing openness to religious and theological ideas from many different sources as additional drivers of his religious and political stances. He posits Strong as a religious modernist, who embraced "a form of theological humanism based on finding God through man", but concludes that he is best seen as "a social reformer and activist rather than a theoretical thinker". (pp.54, 57)

Strong and his church attracted many notable adherents. Judith Brett's chapter focuses on the connections between Strong and Alfred Deakin, already dealt with at length in her excellent biography, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (2017). She shows how the Australian Church and Strong's immanent God resonated with Deakin's profoundly religious nature, his anticlerical attitudes, his rejection of religious orthodoxy, and his recognition of social, economic and political reform as the proper work of Christians. While Deakin's close involvement with Strong, which included a shared concern to alleviate poverty and the evils of sweated labour, did not survive Deakin's elevation to the office of Prime Minister, Brett argues that it was important in honing the "spiritual and intellectual resources he would need for the challenges of building a new nation". (p.85)

Ian Tregenza looks at the career of another key player in Australian Liberalism, who was initially a "natural fit with the Australian Church" (p.115), and part of Strong's inner circle, but who finished up in a very different place. This was Herbert Brookes, a non-dogmatic liberal Christian humanitarian with a commitment to overcoming inequality and class division, who later became a sectarian warrior, involved with secretive paramilitary organisations. Tregenza suggests that an understanding of Brookes' career helps to explain the decline of the Australian Church and the social liberalism that it embodied, reckoning both as casualties of the sectarianism that loomed large in Australian politics for several decades after the first world war.

While seeing Strong and his church as an important conduit, in Victoria, for the ideas of the British Idealists, Maddox is alert to the evolving

and contradictory elements of such thought, and to the tensions that inevitably develop between theory and practice within sites of reform. These realities are nicely demonstrated in several chapters that explore the activity of the Australian Church in relation to specific social issues.

The first of these is Shirley Swain's examination of the witness of Strong before a Royal Commission on charitable institutions. She notes that he did not blame poverty on the poor, and understood that charity often exacerbated rather than ameliorated problems. Yet, despite his understanding of the structural causes of poverty and associated issues he failed to identify structural solutions, and the programs associated with the Australian Church often struggled to free themselves from the limitations of more individually-focussed relief work.

Patricia Curthoys shines a light on the contribution of Strong and other members of the Australian Church to the movement for reform within the criminal justice system, especially through the Australasian Criminology Society, formed in 1895. She reveals Strong and his supporters as familiar with the growing science of criminology and forthright in their belief in the human capacity for rehabilitation and redemption, given appropriate institutional structures and practices. While acknowledging that the Criminology Society had limited practical success, she echoes Maddox's judgement that it was a place in which ideas were "developed, exchanged and tested", and then communicated to the wider community. (Maddox, 2018)

Kate Laing examines the links between the Australian Church and international women's organisations committed to peace, as well as to other issues, including suffrage and maternal and child health. Laing understands this commitment through a maternalist lens as being part of women's "civilising mission", and influenced by Nonconformist Protestant ideas of social justice.

She argues that while the Australian Church "clearly articulated a Christian pacifism", it was Janet Strong rather than Charles who was the leading figure in the church's work in this area.

The Australian Church was dissolved in 1957 having been on the wane since the end of the first world war. In the final chapter, Neville Buch argues that its legacy continues within the Uniting Church in Australia, and notes especially its

“galvanisation of multiple concerns in local congregations as a spiritual force against state power” during Bjelke-Petersen’s premiership. (p.146) In her ‘Postlude’, Maddox, while not wholeheartedly endorsing the argument that the ethos of the Australian Church lives on in the Uniting Church, notices similarities if not a direct line of descent, especially in relation to feminist concerns, commitment to social justice and theological and ecclesiological inclusivity.

This book, modest in size, but expansive in scope, succeeds admirably in realising its aim of contributing to “continuing considerations of the shifting religious currents in Australia’s body politic”. (p.159)

Marion Maddox (Ed.) *Charles Strong’s Australian Church. Christian Social Activism 1885 -1917* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2021), 208pp, including bibliography and index. RRP Hardback \$32.99; eBook \$25.99.

Contributors: Judith Brett, Neville Buch, Patricia Curthoys, Wayne Hudson, Kate Laing, Marion Maddox, Shurlee Swain, Ian Tregenza

Foreword: Norman Habel

**Review by Judith Raftery, March 2022**

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Temporary arrangements are to be made for an acting Treasurer at the forthcoming AGM of the Society on July 21, 2022.

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Coupled with drought the results could indeed be apocalyptic. The monstrous “thing in the bush” could emerge at any time to upturn and annihilate the breadbasket of the colony. While First Nations people had developed sustainable ways of living with such conditions and were skilled at harvesting a wider range of food sources, Europeans with their dependence on crops and livestock for their food economy were deeply vulnerable to such ecological ‘plagues’. Reliable meteorological data on periods of drought is only available from the 1860s but there were severe drought conditions in Victoria between 1864 and 1866 and again in 1868 and 1877. Kelly’s threat to bring a vengeance that was “worse than the rust in the wheat or the dearth of a dry season”, even if a vain boast, was likely to have resonated with some power among the bush populations who had lived through such conditions.

There is a mythic quality to Ned Kelly’s place in Australian culture that often carries with it an almost religious fervour. It is in the combination of Kelly’s violent disposition, his lifelong criminality, and the exaggerated sense of the role he would personally play in establishing justice in Queen Victoria’s colony, rather than in any organised political charter, that we find an explanation of Kelly’s dramatic posturing and flamboyant outlawry.

I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue of *Uniting History and Heritage*. I am grateful for the work of the editor, Robert Renton and to all our contributors.

[1] ‘Sidney Nolan and his Ned Kelly Paintings,’ *Google Arts and Culture*, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/sidney-nolan-and-his-ned-kelly-paintings/BwXx5sON4e5sKA?hl=en> accessed 24/04/22. Nancy Underhill, *Sidney Nolan: A Life* (Sydney: New South, 2015),

[2] Nancy Underhill, *Sidney Nolan: A Life* (Sydney: New South, 2015), 16.

Yours, 

(Associate Professor Rev. Glen O’Brien)