

KANGAROO GROUND

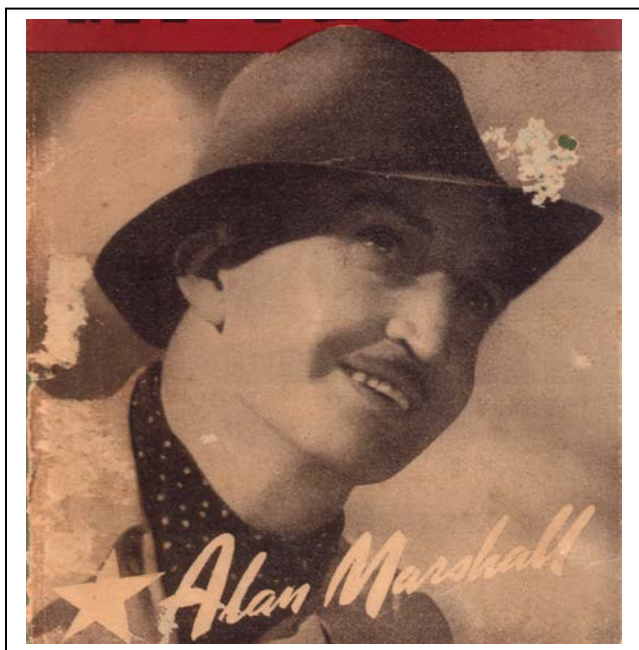
CHRONICLE

Newsletter of the

Andrew Ross Museum INC

School House, Kangaroo Ground, 3097

Volume 9 No 3
Spring 2003



101 YEAR AGO

Writer, raconteur, and sometime Kangaroo Ground resident Alan Marshall was born in the western Victorian town of Noorat in 1902. Celebrations of his centenary have carried over into 2003. Beside the recollections, celebrations and extracts from Alan Marshall's writing listed below, local historian Mick Woiwoid has recalled for us a time when Alan Marshall in his seventies bought a property at the Bend of Islands. According to Mick, Alan Marshall purchased a river frontage block. On it he had a circuit track cleared so that he could drive around the property and alongside the Yarra in a small car. He did not keep the property for long, nor did he build on it.

IN THIS ISSUE

- Wenda Fleming captures some of the highlights and the atmosphere of a special occasion in her report of the *Alan Marshall Celebration* held recently at Kangaroo Ground, on Page 1.
- Lex McClintock, the father of Kangaroo Ground resident Sue Doyle, provides an affectionate and amusing recollection of Alan Marshall, on Page 4.
- Edward Harding used many hours of taped interviews with Alan Marshall to produce a book entitled *Alan Marshall Talking*. Beginning on Page 7, two of Alan Marshall's "yarns" from this collection are reprinted.
- Alan Marshall himself entertained local folk in the 1960s at a certain Pig and Punch Party held in Kings Road, Kangaroo Ground, as recalled on Page 10.
- An extract from a hitherto unpublished recollection of Alan Marshall, written by the late Geoffrey S Close, begins on Page 12.

Permission to use all text and art work has been obtained.

SPECIAL ALAN MARSHALL EDITION

Alan Marshall Night, May 2003

Our recent Alan Marshall night, held in the S E S Hall on the 10th May, showed once again that generosity and good will are alive and well in our community. It could not have happened so well without the ready contribution of a great many people. In the dramatic presentations, our cast rose wonderfully to the occasion and sterling work was put in by our co-directors Peter Oyston and Alan James. As with our Bush Ranger Night held in 2001, Peter's direction produced a great night of entertainment. Alan, with the help of his friend Paul Lyon and in the space of one day, erected a box stage with a gauze front onto which appropriate scenes could be projected with the actors behind either low or full lit. Music was provided by piano accordion player Cliff Tabetki.

Well known actor Dennis Coard read excerpts from Alan Marshall's book *This is the Grass* which is his autobiographical account of life in the 1920s, both in Melbourne City and also in the countryside in and around Kangaroo Ground. While he was reading, the scenes were enacted on the stage behind the gauze. Characters such as Mrs Bronson, Alec and Rube and Tiny at the Kangaroo Ground Pub and Flogger Davies the pieman at the corner of Flinders and Elizabeth Streets came to life, as did Alan Marshall himself.

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“While he was reading, the scenes were enacted.”

Four children sang a song adding interest and atmosphere to the third and final scene when Alan Marshall spoke of his deep attachment to the Australian bush and countryside.



Andrew Steed, Amelia Van Eden, Grace Coard, and Miranda Coglán

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Our women-folk came dressed in boas and beads, tassles and headpieces, and the men resorted to braces and blazers and nifty hats. To fit in with the themes of the night there was plenty of drink, pies and baked potatoes, icecreams and lamingtons. The raffle had a distinctly countryside flavour/savour and there were posters to tell us more about the rich and varied life of Alan Marshall. We also appreciated having our Patron, Bruce Nixon, and Councillor Bob Stubbings and his wife Anne with us.

Altogether, a colourful and lively night.

- Wenda Fleming

CAST

Adults

Janine Taylor
Gil and Mike Poulton
Carol and Warwick Leeson
Richard Simpson
Eleanor Fowler
Chris Steed
John Van Eden
Peter Fleming

Children

Miranda Coglan
Grace Coard
Amelia Van Eden
Andrew and Matthew Steed

ORGANIZERS

Zita Webb
May Leckey
Wenda Fleming

ALAN MARSHALL AS I KNEW HIM

Melbourne artists and writers were a group in the 1940s, and everyone seemed to be tied in some way to the Heidelberg School of painters. They all knew one another. Quite often at our place there would be a meeting of writers. My father was a “pretend” writer, also a commercial artist. Alan was a frequent visitor to our place. That’s where I met him, when I was probably about fifteen years of age. He spoke of gatherings at his sister’s place – Elsie McConnell, a widow with a married son and a teenage daughter – at Bambra Road in Caulfield. At these gatherings of young people, every Sunday night, Alan somehow extracted the young people’s thoughts on various topics, thoughts he could reflect in his newspaper and magazine columns in the *Argus* and *Women*.

I attended these regular meetings for several years. Alan was always a keen listener, but he provided input as well. It wasn’t a party atmosphere, Elsie used to produce cakes and coffee and tea, but often these gatherings would go on until very late at night. Sometimes, if it were very late, Alan would be the one to drive us home. He had a Dodge, perhaps a 1930 model. You’d think a cripple couldn’t manage, but he’d had it all changed so that he could push the clutch with a stick arrangement when needing to change gears, and he had something fixed to the brake also so that he could brake. He was quite a good driver. He lived in a caravan behind his sister’s house.

Later, Elsie McConnell moved from Caulfield to the Eltham district. Alan occupied a bungalow behind Elsie’s house and got about in a van.

It was intended that I should accompany him on a visit to Ayers Rock, but I had become involved with my future wife. He must have been one of the first people to dream of visiting Ayers Rock. In those days nobody went to that part of Australia, it was not even talked about much. Well, he got there and climbed as far as he could – this is with crutches, crawling, and with some assistance I believe from aboriginal people. That was meant to be the limit of his journey, but for some reason he continued on to northern Australia, and even flew to some islands further north.

It seemed to me that he was well able to support himself with his writings. He told me once that he had learnt always to avoid another well-known Melbourne writer whose greeting in the street was usually, “Lend us a quid,” knowing well that the quid would be bet on a race horse.

At one time he lived above a shop, in Clifton Hill, I think. There were four of us in Alan’s Dodge: Alan and a friend named Phillip, another writer and also a cripple in the front seat and my friend Geoff Close and I in the back seat. Also in the back seat were the crutches; they couldn’t have them in the front. He used to drop us off at the corner of Burke Road and Whitehorse Road on his way home to Clifton Hill. We got out of the car and took the crutches with us. Off went the car to Clifton Hill. Somehow the situation was put to rights. We ran, or waved the crutches, or Alan saw something in the rear view mirror. It’s possible this is just a story, mind you – I doubt that I would ever take anyone’s crutches – but it fitted his sense of humour.

I recall visiting him once at Bendigo, where he had a caravan. He decided that we should go rabbit shooting. He had a shotgun. We went down a valley and turned back without even sighting a rabbit. As we returned he said, “Well, if I throw my hat up, you have a shot at it.” I objected and he eventually agreed that he use a tin instead. He threw the tin up and I shot it full of holes, so I don’t know what might have happened if it had been his hat. It was the sort of entertainment he loved. He was always a sort of bubbling person.

One of the numerous parts of our association was this: he was continually trying to give up smoking. Every time he gave up smoking he gave me his tobacco pouch, cigarette papers, etc. He’d always fail, of course. Once, I received in the post an envelope containing a Turf cigarette packet with three cigarettes in it and a faulty cigarette lighter. Here he was, trying to give up smoking again, and trying to be funny. I responded by repairing the cigarette lighter, smoking the cigarettes, and returning the lighter and the Turf packet with the three butts in it. This was the sort of humour he loved, and it was good from my point of view because I loved him as a person.



This article derives from tape-recorded recollections that Lex McClintock provided recently at his home, 64 Sunbeam Avenue, Ringwood East, where he has a collection of Alan Marshall memorabilia including autographed first editions, and a letter written by Alan’s sister Elsie during the last weeks of Alan’s life.

WHAT A BOOK

Alan Marshall in Conversation with Edward Harding, 1977

Evidently there was no scrub in our forests in the old days; it was the bush fires that brought the scrub, and of course the damned blackberries.

When I was doing my column about life in the bush I had hundreds of letters from old people all over the place, people with marvellously fine memories, and what a book I could have made of them, if anybody had wanted a book like that in those days; you could do it now, I suppose.

But what surprised me was the number of people who remembered how you could walk easily through the forests at one time – no scrub at all – it must have been like the pine forest in Europe.

In fact one old woman wrote that she used to ride her horse among the tall gums in the Yarra Valley, around the Bend of Islands. She said you could walk for miles when she was a girl. Now can you imagine that?



SAVING DOGS FROM NERVOUS BREAKDOWNS

Alan Marshall in Conversation with Edward Harding, 1977

When I was writing *These Are My People* donkeys' years ago, I lived in an old bark hut not far from Research – an old miner's hut, walls full of cracks, with boxes nailed to the wall to hold food and so on; but I always had a great fire, as there was plenty of wood around the place – fifteen acres.

Now it was very lonely at nights; and in those days of course I didn't have people dropping in for a chat the way they do now. But one night there was a scratching at the door – a dog, a Border collie of some kind, very woolly. I said "Goodday" and clicked my teeth, and he came in wagging his tail, and he brought two other dogs with him, a little terrier and a big dog. They made themselves at home, and I gave them some tucker, then they left pretty late – after eleven anyway. I went out with them, and my Tilley lamp threw a good light; I noticed once they were on the road they all separated.

The next night they came again, and I said "Goodday" and clicked my teeth – and they kept coming. I looked forward to it, but it intrigued me. What sort of home were they from, getting our every night, getting together? So except for Saturdays when I often went to the city, I got to know those three dogs very well – I talked to them, they all had different natures, I always fed them; no trouble at all.

Now one day I was sitting in my car in the street in Research – it only has one street – and I saw a woman coming along with a baby, and beside her was one of my friends; the big dog. He glanced up at me, then looked away as if I never existed. That night he came as usual and settled down in front of the fire, so I didn't say a word about the afternoon.



However, about a week later I saw him again, with the woman, but this time I said “Goodday” to him and clicked my teeth. Well, what a shock for him. He looked, he hadn’t the heart to snub me, he gave a fast short wag of the tail and hurried on, in front of the lady, and away.

I gave this a great deal of thought; it was obvious I’d shaken him, but that night he was the same as ever. Should I persevere, subject him to a most refined sort of torture?

Before I saw him again in the township, something else happened. I saw some kids coming along the road on bikes, and who was running behind them but my Border collie, with his nose behind the wheel of the last bike. As they went past, I shouted to him “Goodday” and I clicked my teeth.

Now do you know, that dog skidded in the dust, gave a quick look, did some sort of crazy reverse, then shot ahead like a mad thing, past all the bikes and vanished down the road.

That night, all three of them were there as usual, and they kept coming till I finished the book and gave up the bark hut. God knows where their masters thought they were every night, but I stopped speaking to them in town: it was bad for their nerves.

AT THE PIG AND PUNCH PARTY

Many things happened in Kangaroo Ground in the 1960s. The district’s worst bushfires in living memory twice ravaged the locality, destroying homesteads old and new, and turning areas of bush land into something resembling a moonscape. Concurrently there was the threat, fortunately averted, that much of the district would be submerged when a proposal to establish a reservoir for Melbourne’s water supply was mooted, a proposal that later resulted in the Sugarloaf Reservoir. Power pylons carrying lines from Gippsland to the west were routed through Kangaroo Ground and

residents tried to prevent having the sight or the erection of pylons on their land.

Alongside the Kangaroo Ground Church, a hall was erected. It had been a showroom on a suburban housing estate. Once the hall was re-erected on the Church property and its usefulness considered, the idea of establishing and housing a day kindergarten in it presented a new challenge. Huge sums of money had to be raised, approval and grants sought, and money-making ideas canvassed.

One idea that proved particularly successful was the pig and punch party. The venue was a property in Kings Road, where Alistair Knox had built a house for Hans and Rosalind Werner. Crowds of people always attended. The attractions were a pig on a spit, a pig supplied by the Floberg Family, a huge vat of punch (ingredients not to be disclosed at a Church function), folk singers such as Glen Tomasetti and, at least on one occasion, Alan Marshall.

There he was, a chain-smoking hulk seated close up to the fire, a stack of beer cans beside his chair. Never mind the good food and chat outside! Never mind the wish for more from the folk singers! Never mind having to jam in tightly to be inside! Everybody wanted to listen to this yarn spinner by the fire. On and on went the yarns. The bursts of laughter from the tightly packed crowd seemed likely to lift the Alistair Knox roof. It was entrancing and magical.

Sadly, I now cannot remember one word of Alan Marshall's fireside yarns.

THE QUINTESSENTIAL ALAN

There is one story, though he never wrote about it, which to me reveals the quintessential Alan. When he was a young single man, he was invited to a party and he arrived alone at the gate of the house on his crutches meeting a group of people arriving at the same time. One young man leaped forward to open the gate for him.

"Gee, you're crippled," he announced.

"Yair."

"Gawd, that must be tough."

"I get by," Alan responded shortly.

"No, I mean I really feel sorry for you. You must have a hard time." He sidled alongside and added confidentially, "Well for one thing, I reckon getting girls must be a real problem for you."

Although Alan was furious, he bit his lip and held his tongue.

Sure enough it was a typical Aussie party: a keg of beer out the back and all the men clustered there like blowflies around a carcass while the girls gossiped together in the lounge room.

Alan brooded for a while and then reconnoitred the house. He discovered it had a big old-fashioned bathroom with a solid door that locked from the inside. So he went back into the lounge and began to chat up the girls, regaling them with his past exploits as a carnival fortune-teller.

It wasn't long before they were urging him to demonstrate. So he picked out the most dominating of the girls and examined her palm. Hesitantly, with a great show, he managed to completely tune out everything except the inspired mystical destinies he was constructing around each girl, from what he had been able to deduce by shrewd observation and astute assessment of their personalities.

Eventually – Alan lost track of time – he finished the last girl and looked over his handiwork. They were all glassy eyed, as if hypnotized. The hubbub outside had escalated into an uproar.

Alan got to his feet and positioned himself on his crutches.

“Open the door now,” he said.

One of the girls turned the old fashioned key and opened the door. Alan swept forward on his crutches. He paused in the doorway and looked over the scowling faces until his eyes locked on to those of the fellow he met at the gate.

“You can have your girlfriend back now,” he said quietly. “I’m finished with her.”

With that he let himself out of the house and went home. Such was my friend, my mentor, my hero.

- Geoffrey S Close

