



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Sunday, March 29 at 2.00 pm
New Crossways, 6 Roxburgh Street

Publicans of Port Nicholson: early inns & innkeepers 1840-1855

A talk by Hilda MacDonnell, Wellington local historian.

Followed by afternoon tea.

Survey

Thanks to all members who took the time to complete our recent survey. It confirmed that we are basically heading in the right direction and doing the right things, but also included some excellent ideas. One of those, that the newsletter could be longer, we are fulfilling in this edition by providing a bumper four-page number for this issue.

Tunnel collection

If you haven't already seen it, visit the display of the historical artifacts found during the construction of the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park. It's located on the corner of Taranaki St and Martin Square.

Victorian Dinner

The Basin Reserve flyover Board of Inquiry decision is being appealed at the High Court by NZTA. This means the work continues to protect our heritage but, above all, means significant costs for Save the Basin Campaign Inc. We are doing our bit to make a contribution to the costs by organising a Victorian dinner, tentatively for May 2nd. The idea is to have fun, so participants won't even know they are parting with a donation. It'll be fancy dress, with dinner, entertainment and much more. More details will come out in the near future, but you might like to start thinking about getting a table of friends together.

SPCA Open Day

Wellington SPCA held an open day on Waitangi Day. It must have been a pleasure to all those who support retention and sympathetic re-use of historic buildings to see how the renovations have been carried out with such respect for the history of the building, and any of our members who took the opportunity to visit last year would have been particularly interested. Pictures from the open day can be seen at:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.965796993438295.1073741892.127018160649520&type=3>

Community Treasure Hunt

Crossways and a group of passionate Mt Victoria residents are organising a Community Treasure Hunt on April 12 to help build community links in Mt Vic. This will be a great opportunity to meet new people, become connected and start building supportive networks. The Historical Society expects to have a 'station' in the former quarry at the top of Pirie Street. Come and visit us, and get all your neighbours and Mt Vic friends along too! Meantime, look out for more information about the event.

Clyde Quay School 125th Anniversary Celebrations

March 6-8 is a momentous weekend for Clyde Quay School, celebrating 125 years since its establishment in 1889 and holding a reunion of former pupils and staff. Mt Vic Historical Society is very honoured to have been asked to speak at the opening ceremony on March 7, to place the school's history in the context of Mt Vic and Wellington.

Historical article

The historical note in this newsletter is the first of a series on Mt Victoria WW1 connections, as we start working on the research for our new heritage panel on the Embassy Theatre. This will be part of the programme of community commemorations of WW1 and we aim to have it in place 2016/17. We will be able to share much more with you via the newsletter (and, ultimately, our website) than will be possible to include on the final panel.

Historical Note – World War I

Leslie Gower of McFarlane Street A young man's World War I experience

Leslie Gower of 28 McFarlane Street was just a few days short of his 20th birthday when he embarked on Troopship No. 10, the Arawa, as part of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Dad was a chemist, with a shop at 75 Adelaide Road, and he had two brothers (George and Arthur), an older sister (Frances) and a younger one (Letty). Five foot nine, flaxen-haired and blue-eyed, the press described him as having been, at one time, the premier player at the Brougham Hill Tennis Club in Mount Victoria. He was working as an ironmonger's assistant when he signed up and left a loving and much-loved family behind.

Thanks to a serendipitous find by Bob Cameron, we have many of Leslie's letters home. He wrote to his family as often as he could find time or writing materials. Such letters show not only what it was like for the young soldier, but also something of life at home.

At first, it must have all seemed impressive, if not exciting. He described leaving Wellington harbour to his family:

... We left on Friday morning at about 6.30 as I suppose you'll know all the forts & lighthouses signalled us best of luck etc. The Duchess with a great crowd aboard came as far as Worsler Bay with us then went back to the other boats. It must have been an imposing sight, the 14 ships all in line just the Minotaur & Jap (Ibuki) about 4 or 5 miles ahead then Psyche, Maunganui, Star of India, Hawkes Bay, Limerick & Tahiti, then Philomel, Arawa, Athenic Waimana, Ruapehu & Orari. Then after we got just about abreast of the northern entrance to Pelorous etc we formed up on two lines in same order as above with Minotaur just on horizon hull down straight ahead then a line headed by the Maunganui & another by us (Arawa), the Jap on the horizon to starboard & Psyche to port & Philomel astern."



Leslie Gower may be somewhere in this photograph.

Wellington Infantry Battalion embarking on HMNZT No 10, Arawa, at Wellington Wharves, Oct 1914. [ATL PA1-f-022-6-1]

The day of his birthday, en route for Egypt, Leslie wrote home:

"Things are very dull here, but there's a bit of excitement now & again for instance today there was a boxing tournament so for want of exercise I entered & got half killed. So I thought I go away in some dark corner & die, but instead I went & celebrated my birthday by having, a hot bath in salt water."

His letters home are full of what one imagines are childhood mispronunciations which have become shared family expressions, and of his own humour and nicknames. When he adds a postscript to a letter, for instance, he writes "Pork Sausages".

While he is at sea, on Saturday 23rd October 1914, he imagines how they must all be spending Labour Day at home in Wellington:

Monday. Well its Labour Day today isn't it. I suppose you'll have all been out for a holiday. Cis & Rosie in the side car & bike Dad & Art & Lit in the yacht & Mum, well she's had to stay at home to cut the sammidges & get a hot dinner ready when you all come home sunburnt & tired. Well I'm sunburnt all right. Not a breath of wind today & the sun has been terrifically hot . . .

He missed his older sister's wedding, which took place at the Kent Terrace Presbyterian Church, with a reception at the family's home in McFarlane Street, not long after he left. He was sorry, for many reasons, to miss it but tried to make light of it:

"Its hard luck Cis getting married isn't it cos now I'll have to write a separate letter to her whereas before I just had to write to "Dear all". You see I'm still as big a dodger as ever, this "sodgering" doesn't break you of a habit like that it tends to bring out all the astuteness."

Leslie was a gunner, in the Third Battery of the New Zealand Field Artillery. From Zeitoun Camp in Cairo he reports on the serious business of soldiering, but always enquires after the family news. Here's part of a letter to his sister (whom he often calls the little Rascal), who was to be in the fifth standard in the new year and was clearly a bit special to him, dated 12 January 1915:

Dear Litty

Thanks so much for your nice letter I received it today just a few minutes ago after tea & was so glad to see the writing. At first glance I wondered what young lady it could be from of course I could easily pick that it was a "young lady's" handwriting. I do so hope that you pass your Xaminashun nicely & with plenty to spare just to be a bit better than brudder Les, the only thing he could pass is a 'telegraph post' eh?

*Well kiddie I'll just start right in to tell you what we do during the day but you must promise to hand it round the fambli (you don't know that word). But before I start I must tell you that a young man was asking me if you were still as naughty as you used to be, you didn't tell me about this sweetheart of yours, you must have a lot, this one was 'Alf East' & he asked after everyone. . . . Now to business: At 5.30am Reveille, Stables at 6 that's grooming & feeding etc & it lasts until 7, then breakfast about 7.30, then Boot & Saddle at 8, that means a half hour to parade & to get horses saddled up & harness cleaned up & yourself all ready for parade. Then parade at 8.30, then we go out into the desert about a mile or so & manoeuvre, that is, come into & go out of action in various positions. Then we come in again at 11 for Stables again which last till 12, then dinner about 12.30 parade again 2pm this time we are timed for harnessing up 20 horses (3-6 horses & 2 hacks) hooking **up**, (horses together) & hooking **in**, (to vehicles) numbering of the subsection & all numbers mounted fastest time is so far for us is 4 minutes 27 seconds. English Regular Army record is 4 minutes 7 seconds so its not so bad for us "Cox's' Army" is it?*

Camp in Cairo was a mixture of hard work and tedium, much unpleasantness but with moments of entertainment:

"In camp at the mess room concerts they call out for the boy with the baby voice, that's me. I never knew before that I had such a gentle voice, in fact at home I'd often been told just the reverse. . . . The latest craze here is vaccination, everyone has to be done. So far beyond a slight itchiness it has had no effect upon me although there are dozens whom are in hosp. with it & as soon as we are over this lot they're going to inoculate us for Diphtheria I believe. So what with the dose we got on the boat & these lots I think that if it is what it is reported to be I'll be O.K. eh? The only thing that they can't or won't cure here is sore throat & cold which one has continuously here, cos you come home wet thro no time to change even if you had the clothes then by the time you have time to change it is very cold like a Southerly morning in Wellington" [23 January 1915]

Leslie would share minute details such as the brand and price of cigarettes available but would always enquire after family members directly. He regularly expresses his confidence that he will be fine, despite the hardships and accidents, whether genuine or put on for the reassurance of family.

On Friday 12 March, from Helmia Camp in Egypt, for instance, he wrote:

Dearest Mum,

Thanks for your two letters one on 25th Jan & the other 1st Feb. There is not the slightest need for you to worry yourself about me I'm O.K. (Orl Korrect) & weigh 12 stone 3 lbs. I'll soon be up to up to you eh? How's little "Mrs Lard" eh? I suppose the envelope that was not my writing was the Censors so that's all right. I didn't send you the wrong letter did I. Was it a very loving one. . . .

From a new camp in Egypt, Helmia, on Monday 14th March 1915, he wrote:

Dear Arthur

Thanks so much for your nice letter of 11th February, It was so characteristic of you. I'm so glad you've started work, what do you think about it, do you like it, of course you won't just to start with but after awhile when you've got the hang of the work you've got to do you'll enjoy it I'm sure. I'm so sorry that I can't write a very long letter this time 'cos we're all busy getting ready to move away from here. One day last week we had Reveille at 2.30am & started out at 3o'clock. We went about 15 miles & then the battle started. We took up five positions & then came home, started about 3o'clock & arrived home about 6o'clock so you see we had a big day that day. . . .

Later that month, on 27th March, from Helmia:

Dear All

I write at you hoping you are well as it leaves me at present except for a plastered head, the result of a kick. I was going through the horse lines & one hard-case of a horse bumped me into another. The horse resented this method of approaching her so she let fly with both her hinds, one got me in the ribs & the other on the side of the 'ed & sent me flying about three yards just like a comet. I believe it was very funny, It's lucky how I escaped so lightly but as soon as I felt that she was going to kick I ran into her or rather fell towards her 'cos I couldn't possibly have got clear enough to miss it. Well the doctor reckoned that it saved me - well never mind I had 3 days off on that account so I'm quite satisfied. . . .

By July Leslie is at Gallipoli:

6/7/15

Dear All,

As you'll see I'm still alive very much so but of course you'll not be surprised at that 'cos you've heard that the Turks can't shoot for nuts. Although a few of us got hit it is only by the shell that came our way 'cos they don't know where else to go if they're aimed at us. Well its exceptional bad shooting cos I don't suppose 5% of them burst close enough to us to make it dangerous. In fact by the way they send them over & shout, they either haven't seen us & are searching, or else they've seen the flashes of the guns & it is a recognised thing that its almost an impossibility to range a battery by that means. We are the only Colonial troops here the others of Brigade in fact everyone but our little Battery are up at Anzac Cove a wee bit north of Gaba Tepe. . . . Best love to all from your loving son Leslie

On 10 July 1915, from Fly Farm on the Gallipoli Peninsular, he wrote:

Dear All

How are you all keeping out in dear old N.Z. One wouldn't believe how dear a few dirty old streets & buildings become to anyone until he is away from them. Things are very quiet here now (we haven't fired for five days, this is the sixth) We've been getting just praise for our shooting & its only necessary to speak to the infantry & you soon think you're a real marvel the way they open out. But of course that's "non to do wid me" its our O.C. We've just to do as we're told its all mechanical at our end. There's a good bit of dysentery & diarrhoea going round the whole forces in fact its uncommon you are if you don't suffer the latter. I think its all on account of the flies cos they're round you in myriads, you 'can't keep them off your food. A slice of jam & bread is green with them in well before you've put it down & they'll often fly into your mouth after a piece the Lord only knows where they've been previously. Then just below us on the beach there are 12 dead horses within 3/4 mile to be buried. They're well blown up, look something like as if Litty's been at them with a bike pump & you can guess what the stink is like

The last proper letter he wrote, from the Gallipoli Peninsula, puts a brave face on what must have been the horror of the frontline:

13/7/15

Have just received Mum's 3 letters 11-27/5 & 4/6/15 & Arthur's 17/5 also Auckland Weekly also two parcels, sox & Mo-Jo & "by gum its good, quite the bestest I've even tasted". I was just going to write & ask you to send some along occasionally just for a change. We had a big scrap here a couple of days ago & the infantry did well all along the line we had some pretty close shaves too "high xplozif" & the scrub about 100 yds in front of us was set afire what oh! We were firing at intervals of 20 seconds then the fire became so bad that the left section had to stop so that meant twice as much for us to fire. Its great fun trying to put the fire out and shrapnel and "I xplosif" still comin' over strong, its something worth doing, you get so engrossed that you don't think of the risk. Bestest love to all specially that hard case Litty Leslie

Only about six days later, 21-year old Leslie was seriously wounded. He was taken on board the H.S. Grantully Castle at Lemnos on the 19th of July and died as a result of "fractured spine", still on board the Grantully Castle, on the 26th. He was buried at sea.



28 McFarlane Street today

His family would have no grave to mark Leslie's short life, but the Kent Terrace Presbyterian Church recorded his name in gold on its Roll of Honour for the First World War, along with others of its congregation who died or served in the conflict¹. In August 1915 the pastor, Rev. Dr. Kennedy Elliott, spoke of him at evening worship, describing Leslie as dying "noble death in the Dardanelles". No doubt as some kind of consolation, it was reported that "The preacher was convinced that we had come righteously into this national conflict".

By Joanna Newman

With thanks to Bob Cameron for sharing his transcription of Leslie's letters.