



# MT VICTORIA

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## Historical Society News

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**No. 69, March 2014**

**Sunday, April 6 at 2.00 pm**  
**Crossways, 6 Roxburgh Street**

## *Salt beef and the farmers' ordinary*

**Tony Simpson**

**Author of *A distant feast: a history of New Zealand cuisine***

*followed by afternoon tea*

With the indulgence of the New Zealand Arts Festival over, and in case you are feeling on restricted rations, we are providing a unique opportunity for you to once more sample the delights of great New Zealand culture. Come and hear well-known writer and historian, Tony Simpson, talk about the history of our cuisine.

### **A new MVHS project**

There has been a lot of talk about World War I commemorations recently and the MVHS committee has joined the fray. We are working towards a presentation and guided walk in March 2015, featuring the lives of Mt Victorians during the 'Great War'. (We're planning another event for 2018, focusing on the end of the War and the influenza epidemic.) The results will also have a lasting presence of our website – which, by then, will be newly designed to facilitate guided walks and other user-friendly functionality.

We are keen to hear from members about any World War I-related stories from Mt Victoria. They may be about life here during the War, names of Mt Victoria residents who fought in the war or served in other ways (perhaps as nurses, orderlies, tending horses), businesses or other activities supporting the war effort etc. If you can only provide names, that's fine – we can do more research. To get in touch, contact Joanna on 385 2254 or [jonewman@xtra.co.nz](mailto:jonewman@xtra.co.nz).



8 Hawker Street

Last year, Joanna had the pleasure of meeting Mary Harris, who was in New Zealand visiting sites associated with her mother, Elizabeth Alexander. Elizabeth's extraordinary achievements are little known but very significant. Mary's visit revealed a new aspect of the unique heritage of Mt Victoria.

We are grateful to her for the historical article over the page and look forward to sharing another article from her in the future, with more about Elizabeth's work and the radar station on Mt Victoria.



37-39 Majoribanks Street

## Elizabeth Alexander and 8 Hawker Street



Elizabeth Alexander, probably in the Lab.

On April 1st 1943, Elizabeth Alexander moved into 8 Hawker St with her three children, Bill 6, Mary 4, and Bernice 2. With us was Mrs Few, who had come to our previous house in Hay St for a couple of weeks to help out and who stayed for 4 years. 8 Hawker St was a good find for Elizabeth because it just round the corner from her work and had recently been done up for letting. Her work was in the Radio Development Lab, the cover name for New Zealand's secret radar unit that operated from the tall building at 37-39 Majoribanks St, now an apartment block.

Elizabeth was a scientist who had been working in Singapore where her husband, New Zealander Norman Alexander, was Professor of Physics at Raffles College and where we three were born. They had met at Cambridge where Norman was one of Rutherford's PhD students. Elizabeth was working as an Intelligence Officer in radio direction finding at the Singapore Naval Base when the Japanese Army invaded Malaya in December 1941. There were already strong radio research links between Singapore and New Zealand and by then New Zealand was manufacturing radar sets for the Admiralty for installation at the Base. Early in 1942 Elizabeth was ordered to take us children to New Zealand for safety with Norman's family and return to Singapore with those urgent radars. But Singapore fell soon after we arrived, we were stranded and for a year she had no news of Norman. Norman's family would, of course, have looked after us, but Elizabeth did not want to be a burden to anyone, so she set about finding a job. Some of her colleagues from Cambridge were by then working in radar research. Elizabeth got the job of setting up and running the operational research section at the Radio Development Lab.

We had no furniture but generous friends took some from storage to lend to us. As Elizabeth's salary rose a little, we eventually had curtains but we never made carpets. For us children 8 Hawker St was a happy place from which we could sometimes visit Elizabeth's office and from which Billy and I could get to school at Roseneath by bus, tram or on foot. In January 2013 I revisited it for the first time since 1946, to find that it looked much the same. The front gate has gone, a retaining wall has been built to stop the front garden from sliding into the street and the back garden now has a garage that opens to the street behind. There is something different about the path to the front door and the porch too, because in my time the porch was big enough to have a bedroom over it. Along the right hand side of the path from the front gate there was a whistle bush (well, that is what you got if you rolled the leaves properly) - in real life *Karamu* (*Coprosma*) - which was also an aeroplane from which Billy as pilot and me as rear gunner, won the war many times over. The rest of the front garden was grassed over with a camellia bush in the middle, good for climbing, which produced both pink and white flowers. Elizabeth would sometimes wear one in her buttonhole for work. The back garden was all down to vegetables and we all worked in it because we needed to. Elizabeth's salary was not great and, as well as feeding and clothing us all, she also paid Mrs Few.

I did not ask to go inside the house when I revisited Hawker St in 2013 because I feared a sizeable emotional reaction, but I imagine that the layout of rooms must be much the same. There were 4 rooms on the ground floor; the sitting room was first on the left, then the play-room and, as you turned the corner behind the stairs, there was the kitchen with a useful room off it where all sorts of things went on and where I remember Elizabeth opening our regular Friday evening bucket of oysters. Upstairs, over the kitchen, was the bathroom with a room off it which would probably have been built as a dressing-room but which we called the-little-room-off-the-bathroom which held a spare bed on which the cat produced kittens one day. Further upstairs, Elizabeth's bedroom was over the play-room, and next to it was Bernice's and my bedroom where we could watch the trains going out to Upper Hutt. I wonder if the huge picture of God that Bernice drew on the wall over her cot, to look after her in the night, is still there under layers of wallpaper. Mrs Few's room was over the porch and Billy's room was over the room where Elizabeth used to open the oysters.

Elizabeth had her own radar station on top of Mount Victoria where the car park now is and where we sometimes went with her by navy lorry to take food to the WRNS who operated it. Sometimes we also flew kites up there, unaware that they were part of Elizabeth's research, but it was not very successful because the wind was too gusty and seagulls attacked them. The best way of getting back to Hawker St was to slide down on the pine needles and land in the bouncy broom bushes at the top of Majoribanks St. I was glad to see in 2013 that their descendants are still there, as is the patch of flat land, the only place within easy reach of Hawker St where we could kick a ball around.



Elizabeth in the garden at 8 Hawker Street.

As children, we had no idea of what Elizabeth was going through as we all waited for Daddy to come home. When he did, he did not stay long. Elizabeth wound up her work and our home, took us to England to begin our colonial orphanage, and then returned to Singapore with Norman to help him get things going again after the war. Without him, life in New Zealand was not very happy but she made 8 Hawker St a happy home for her children for a brief period in our war-torn childhood. Her work at the Radio Development Lab is only now being recognised as fundamental in the history of radar in New Zealand and the beginning of radio-astronomy in Australia.

*Mary Alexander Harris, February 2014*