

Labassa *lives*

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2017

Master of the game



Left: A shooting party: Alexander William Robertson front row, right. The location and identity of the other shooters are as yet unknown.

Photo: Neil Robertson.

Labassa's architectural exuberance and flourishes seem strangely at odds with the demeanour of its C19th owner and 'auteur' Alexander William Robertson. In all known photos of Mr Robertson he appears as rather dull, wooden and passive. But this is an illusion and the corporeal man had much more in common with his mansion, most conspicuously as a vigorous and daring sportsman.

Mr Robertson regularly hunted red deer, with The Melbourne Hunt Club sometimes chasing quarry for 50 kilometres across paddocks and rivers and into the streets of Melbourne itself. Before foxes and packs of foxhounds were established, riders hunted kangaroos and dingos using specially bred hounds.

Red deer were generously provided by the Chirnside brothers and special trains transported hunters, hounds and horses to Werribee for the start. After an exhausting three hour pursuit the deer would be cornered and often returned unharmed to run another terrifying day.

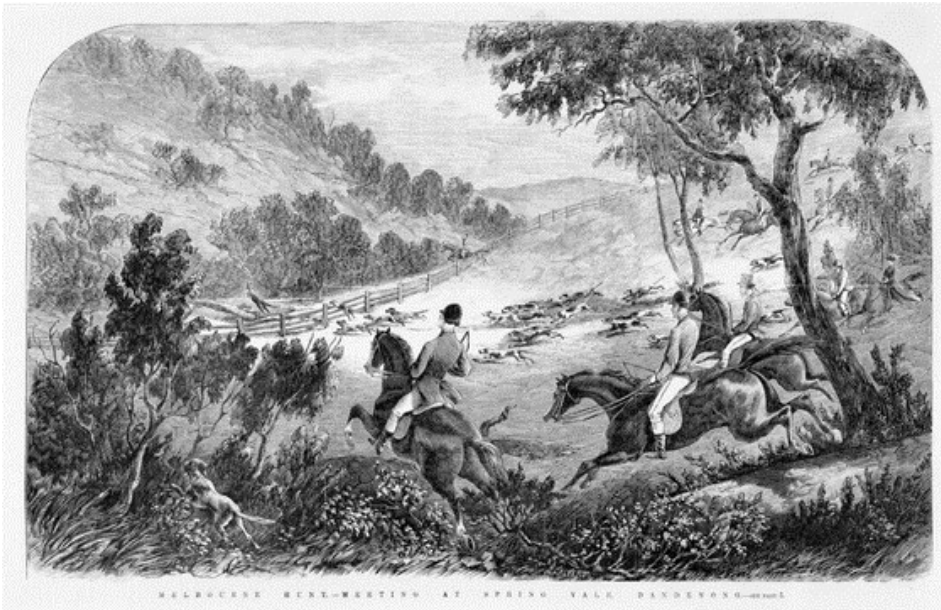
Mr Robertson made a dramatic entrance at one such hunt in 1878. The deer was hunted from Koroit Creek (now Deer Park) to Williamstown, through South Melbourne, the Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road, South Yarra, Richmond, back to Malvern, and finally to Gardiners Creek close to Mr Robertson's then mansion in Toorak. "The stag struggled hard against being taken; but Mr. A. W. Robertson, who lives in the neighbourhood, and who ... was attracted to the scene of operations, rendered incalculable service in securing the animal.

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Master of the game (cont.)



Left:

Wood engraving of Melbourne Hunt meeting at Spring Vale, Dandenong published in *The Illustrated Australian News*, 27 September, 1867.

Image:

State Library of Victoria.

"I have seen Mr Robertson render similar service some years ago on an occasion when it became very difficult to catch 'old Cotterell'¹ but Mr R. seems to possess special qualifications for such emergencies — a quick eye and indomitable courage." (*Australasian*, 3 August, 1878)

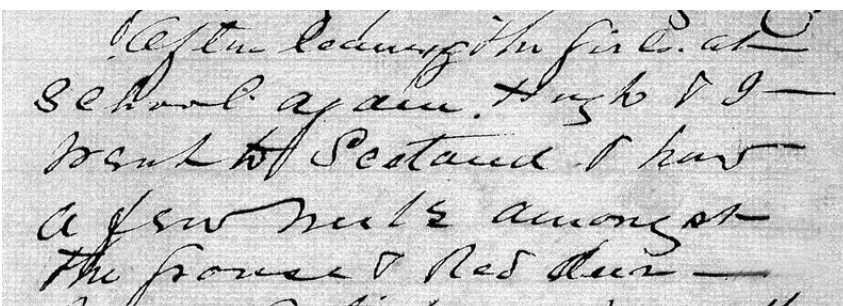
The "similar service some years ago" refers to a three hour hunt through seven parishes in 1868. This hunt attained legendary status and was talked about for more than 40 years.

"It is interesting to see what a man who thoroughly understands stock and has nerve can do. One day we ran Cotterell into a poultry-yard at Coburg, with a paling fence around it, too high for the deer to jump in his then blown condition. Charlie Riley was creeping along the top of the fence with a rope, to try and take him, and as the stag had his antlers, it looked a difficult and dangerous venture. A. W. Robertson called out, "Why do you not throw him as you would a calf?" George Watson called out to Robertson, "Why do you ask the boy to do what you would not do yourself?"

"Wouldn't I, by Heaven," said Robertson, and in a jiff was alongside the astonished deer, caught him by the off fore-leg, and threw him and with his knee on the stag's throat, held him until he was bound." (*Australasian*, 19 June, 1909)

The photo on page 1 is unlikely to have been a Melbourne Hunt Club event as the men are holding guns. Mr Robertson was, however, partial to grouse and deer stalking in Europe. In 1889, while Labassa was undergoing its refurbishment, Mr Robertson took his son, Hugh, to Scotland for a shooting season. "Once more satisfying myself," he wrote to his brother William in Canada, "that there is no place on the Continent to equal Bonnie Scotland as a Sanitorium and field for Sport."

¹ 'Cotterell' was a local term for deer, so called after one heroic deer survived several long runs and was eventually taken at Mount Cotterell.



Left: Excerpt from a rare letter dated 27 October 1889 in which Mr Robertson outlines his travels, including Paris for the opening of the Eiffel Tower and a few weeks in Scotland among the grouse and red deer.

Courtesy: Neil Robertson.

Watsons at War



Left: Watson family and friends circa 1920.

Standing: Mrs Lahiff (family friend), Flora Kate Watson, Gerry Lahiff (friend) and Daphne Watson.

Seated: Keith Watson and Malcolm Watson.

Photo: Peter Watson.

Little is known about life at Labassa during the 'Great War'. There are no stories of rooms transformed into hospital wards, convalescing soldiers or large fundraisers. Flora Kate Watson and her daughters Daphne and Hinemoa (Nenie) did their bit for the Red Cross Comforts Fund by organising large fundraisers in town halls or more spacious private mansions.

The Watson boys John Boyd III (Jack), James Keith (Keith) and Malcolm 'answered the call to arms' and enlisted. Malcolm never made it to the battlefield after being found medically unfit due to an old injury but Jack and Keith both fought in France.

Jack enlisted in London in 1915 because the Australian army wouldn't take him on account of his eyesight and hearing. He travelled to England where the test was easier and 'had the luck' to be assigned to the famous Royal Highlanders or Black Watch. Keith passed the Australian medical in 1916 and served with the 7th Infantry.

News of the Watson boys reached Labassa through private letters, cables and an occasional pro forma letter from the Army. Jack, who had earned the nickname "Alright" for cheering "Alright" at Hell's Corner, Ypres, France in 1915 sent an 'alright' letter to his former school principal Mrs Wilfred Austin, which was published in the *Hamilton Spectator*: "Here's another of your old boys fighting for his country, or at least has been, as I got smashed up at the beginning of February. ... Only had nine days out yonder as I was foolish enough to try and stop a shell. I managed to come off pretty lightly only getting a touching up on the back.

"However after 15 weeks in the repair shop, I am almost all right again and on being discharged hope to have another go at the Huns. ... The cold in the trenches in January is terrible, but for all the cold and suffering one goes through out in France it's a great life and there's never a genuine growl. The Green Vale College honour roll is a lengthy one, all the past pupils of military age being at the front." (*Hamilton Spectator*, 6 May 1916)

Jack and Keith survived several 'close shaves'. Keith was on the troopship *Ballarat* on 25 April, 1917 when it was torpedoed by a U Boat in the English Channel. Less than a month later, Lieutenant Jack Watson was on the *RMS Mongara*, when it was torpedoed and sank. The reassuring cable Mrs Watson received from her son in hospital in Colombo explained that the vessel had 'met with an accident'.

Two months before the end of the war in August 1918, Keith was wounded and hospitalised in an English military hospital. Fortunately for the Watson boys they had a very well-placed aunt, their deceased father's sister, Lady Eacharn of Galloway Castle in Scotland.

Lady Eacharn took a "warm interest in the welfare of Australian soldiers and regularly sent game and poultry from her estate to their hospitals and convalescent homes". She also offered her home for "holidays" with diversions "not the least pleasant being the shooting parties" (*Australasian*, 27 July 1918).

Watsons at War (cont.)



Left: John Boyd Watson III (known as Jack).

Photo: Peter Watson.

Both brothers suffered wounds with far-reaching effects: Keith was shot in the neck; Jack suffered from a spinal injury and shell shock. With the War over and her sons about to return safely to Melbourne, Mrs Watson resumed her efforts to sell Labassa, the auction notices now promoting the mansion as suitable for use as an institution or conversion into flats.

Her timing was inopportune as the War had an unexpected and deadly aftermath. The auction notices were published at the height of the Spanish Flu. Under the Influenza Emergency Regulations 1919: "persons in an infected area were forbidden to assemble for a common purpose within any enclosed building or place whether public or private in numbers exceeding twenty at any one time". Church services, movie screenings and auctions were moved into the open air.

On the day of the auction, the sale was moved from Scott's Hotel to Labassa's front lawn. According to *The Prahran Telegraph*, a large crowd gathered and bidding was "brisk". The final bid of £6850, however, was "slightly under the reserve" and the property was passed in for private treaty. Later that year, Mrs Watson sold the mansion to real estate agent Stanley Sergeant, who completed Labassa's conversion into flats in July 1920.

Myth and Mystery: The newel lamps

For myth-making nothing quite matches the story of how Labassa's newel lamps disappeared. The lamps made their last known appearance in a segment produced by architect Robin Boyd for the ABC's television program *Panorama*, broadcast in February 1958 (see screen shot right). Both lamps were gone by c.1970 when Peter Tarpey photographed his 'Labassa family', showing residents sitting on the newel posts.

The most popular story involves a wild party that was gate-crashed by the Hell's Angels. In some versions one lamp was torn out, in other versions both. The casting of the Hell's Angels as villains has some basis. Mick Coleman was at this notorious party in 1969 and recalls "a really chaotic, strange night. It was so big, hundreds of people. I remember ending up on the roof and looking down and the street was packed with people. The Hell's Angels were there. The police came. That was the night one of the newel post lamps went missing. In the morning it was gone."

We have an eyewitness, however, to help solve one mystery while creating another. Mick Coleman's friend Conrad Miles pursued the culprit. "A party was in full swing in one of the upstairs flats when someone came in and yelled that someone was wrecking one of the newel lights.



Left: Screen shot from ABC *Panorama* segment (1958). Note original newel lamps and carpet runner.

"Everyone immediately ran out and down the stairs. It was like that scene from *Battleship Potemkin* with the crowd running down the Odessa steps. We ran after the guy and got it away from him. He dropped it on the nature strip and I think someone took it inside. The story about the Hell's Angels taking it isn't true. The thief looked like anyone else around the house at the time – he had a goatee and page boy haircut. I don't know what happened to the lamp but the one on the right side of the staircase was still there after the party."

What happened to the lamp dropped on the nature strip or for that matter the one that was said to be still there in the morning? For another version of this story read Julie Ryan's account in "A better quality tenant", page 6.

“A better quality tenant”

Julie Ryan: Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony Flat), 1969-1970

In Labassa’s annals of the bizarre and ridiculous, Julie Ryan’s story of the men in the cellar is singular: “I was woken one night and told a couple of guys were bricking themselves into the cellar. They were heroin addicts or off their face on something. I said, ‘I don’t care!’ because I wanted to sleep. But, of course, I went and had a look anyway. There were these two weird, bearded, hairy guys trying to brick themselves in. I have no idea what they thought they were doing. They obviously got out.”

Julie’s entrée to Labassa was much more conventional. She rang LJ Hooker Real Estate about a vacancy that Jude [Judith] Brooks, a teaching colleague at Doveton Technical School, had mentioned. Jude who lived in Flat 8 (Dining Room) said the flat above was empty and the agents were looking for “a better quality tenant”. When Julie was asked to come for a face-to-face interview she went dressed-to-impress in a fashionable crimplene suit, stockings and gloves.

Another Doveton Tech colleague, Annie, joined her in Flat 6 and with only two small rooms they extended their living area onto the Balcony. Their tiny kitchen, built into a 19th century linen cupboard, presented some challenges but Julie still managed to cook a three course Christmas feast for 34 people.

By contrast, their bathroom, the original 1890 Master bathroom, was the most spacious in the house. The acoustics were so good that Julie’s friend Bert used to practise his violin there. The bathroom was also a convenient escape route when someone yelled “the cops are coming!”. “You could be having a bath and someone would come rushing in, bolt out through the window and up onto the roof.”

Julie met her future husband Jim Shiels on the Balcony and when they married many of the residents attended. After Annie moved out and Jim moved in, Flat 6 took on a unique ambience.

Jim and Julie were part of the Bahá’í community, which was particularly strong in Caulfield at the time. They decorated their mantelpieces with beautiful flowers from Labassa’s garden, including the property’s original magnolia tree.



Above: The Balcony which became part of Flat 6’s living space.

Photo: Julie Ryan.



Above: Julie Ryan on her wedding day.

Photo: Julie Ryan.

A better quality tenant (cont.)

Julie recalls an argument or dispute between the residents in the main house and in the servants' quarters. She isn't sure what it was about: "It may have been about a noisy party and being kept awake. Or, it may have been something to do with a light that was taken by somebody who'd come to a party. The next day, when we realised it was gone, people in the house were really concerned. The residents managed to track it down and get it back."

Once the dispute was resolved, the tenants had a peacemaking ceremony: "I bought an olive tree and we had a symbolic planting. When I returned a few years ago the olive was a magnificent gnarled old tree but has now gone."

Among the residents who left a lasting impression were her elderly neighbours in Flat 4. For a twenty-something young woman Vera and Fred Halford belonged to another world. "Mr Halford was very gentlemanly and would raise his hat. Whenever they went out Mrs Halford was beautifully dressed – stockings with seams, gloves, a stole and fabulous hats. She was always 'made up' with ruby red lips formed in a cupid's bow." Julie saw Mrs Halford only once in her nightwear – a soft satin quilted gown in rose pink. When she was invited into the Halford flat, Julie was sometimes offered a sherry while she sat and listened to Mrs Halford's stories of being a racing car driver in the 1920s.

A Labassa wedding

Many Labassa residents attended Julie Ryan and Jim Shiel's wedding at Sherbrooke Lodge. Can you identify any residents in these photos? All photos were taken from proof sheets courtesy of Julie Ryan.



My friend Alvyn Davy (1950 - 1993)

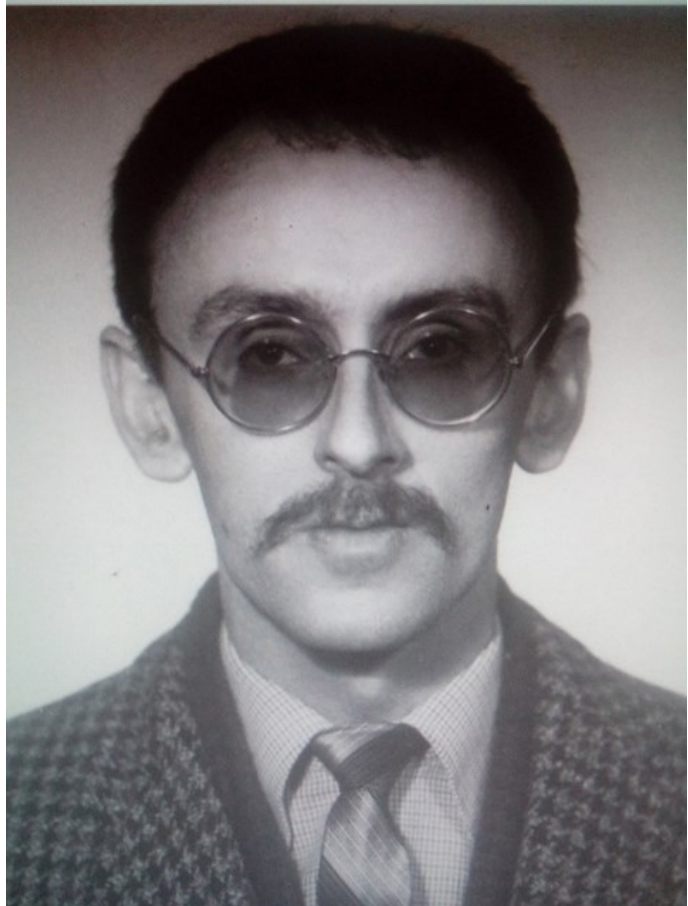
By Javant Biarujia

New Zealand-born Alvyn Davy lived at Labassa in an upstairs bedroom facing onto the main balcony [Flat 6], from the late 1970s until the early 1980s. He died in September 1993, following a long battle against AIDS. The following is excerpted from the eulogy given at his funeral service at Fawkner Crematorium.

Alvyn and I became friends through our shared love of books. However, it was a matter of destiny we should meet: Bali was home to us both in 1977 (we would pass each other in the street) and, back in Melbourne we found ourselves neighbors at Labassa.

I've heard it said that when a person dies, a library is lost. How keenly do we feel the loss of Alvyn's library when we can no longer ask him to tell us again about the Peruvian women he sat opposite, on the train high up in the Andes, who warmed live chickens beneath their mushrooming skirts; or his interview with the Aga Khan on the Île St-Louis and his *faux pas* that cost him his chance to be part of a royal household; or his days as butler on Belgrave Square; or his time as futon maker in Fitzroy.

Now our own libraries record fragments. When I first met Alvyn, I found amongst the heaped treasures of his room at Labassa a Penguin edition of *Against Nature* by Huysmans (described as one of the strangest literary works in existence). The cover shows a detail of the "Comte de Montesquiou" by Baldini. The count bore a striking likeness to Alvyn: the aristocratic tuft of beard, the dandy's moustache, the high forehead and air of classical metaphor. I think Alvyn saw much of himself in the book, for Des Esseintes' hankering for absolute truth through excess was curiously similar to his own. Here Alvyn found the world in which he felt comfortable; not the outside world full of pettiness and distortions, but, ironically, an interior world where truth was attained through the senses and knowledge amassed by way of worldly pleasures. He was at once an aesthete and an ascetic.



Above: According to Javant Biarujia, Alvyn Davy bore a striking likeness to Comte de Montesquiou.

Photo: Alvyn's passport photo, courtesy Stephen Hall.

Alvyn's quest for the divine took him to many strange levels of consciousness and many far-flung places; he immersed himself in many different religions and quite often held in his hands the curate's egg.

He sought to make meaning out of life. He sought to uncover life's mysteries through enquiry and analysis. He synthesised the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Zen, Aleister Crowley, Huysmans, the Mahabharata, the Marquis de Sade, Ishtar, Adonis and Aristophanes.

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Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome. Please forward to:
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PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping
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Open days: 10.30am—4.00pm

July 16
August 20
September 17
October 15
November 19

Special Christmas opening**Sunday December 10:**

Due to limited public access during a film shoot earlier this year, Labassa will be open 10.30am—4pm, Sunday December 10.

My friend Alvyn Davy (cont.)

Even when he abandoned Zen Buddhism for the Church of his childhood, toward the end of his life (just as the author of *Against Nature* returned to his), he did not give up his penchant for the unusual – he merely reinterpreted such phenomena in an evangelic diction (a conversion no more miraculous than, say, from Imperial to Metric). For instance, when he first espied a Nicole Newman sculpture – part Louis XIV, part Louis Vuitton, part Thais – he exclaimed: “My God! It’s the beast from the first passage of the Book of Ezekiel!”

It was not until I moved into Labassa myself at the beginning of 1981 (just four months after the National Trust acquired the mansion) that Alvyn and I got to know each other.

His room was crammed with remarkable objects: his own small portrait of Christ impaled on a palpitating heart, His leg and arm amputated; the drawing of an erect penis by an Anglican minister; carnival masks and kitchen sink art; a vase of arrows; a human skull and empty snail shells; chillums and cherubim.

Alvyn clung to the vestiges of other eras, the decadent chutes of civilisation, gilded and patinated. Labassa was the perfect architectonic expression of this.

Alvyn loved plants – especially flowers. He was an exceptional florist. For my 26th birthday party at Labassa, he decorated my rooms [Master Bedroom Suite, Flat 4] with a *faux arbuste* made out of holly leaves; a folding screen of date palm leaves; an ithyphallic palm tree fashioned out of a column beribboned with *Ficus* leaves, capped with a gland of foliage (from which little aluminium balls spurted); and a magnificent arrangement of fruit, crowned with a circle of eight candles (my lucky number), for the dinner table.

Alvyn shared Des Esseintes’ enjoyment of poetic recipes and the virtues attributed to certain plants.



Above: Alvyn Davy seated on the window ledge of his Balcony flat.

Photo: Rodney Ashton.

When he was diagnosed with HIV, he became what Durrell calls a “plant-magic man”. He studied herbal properties diligently and filled his kitchen with bottles of lobelia, thuja, dock, marsh-mallow, fennel, turmeric, licorice and bear-berry. He spent a great deal of time in his old car, hunting down apothecaries who seemed to belong more to medieval Provence than to modern-day Melbourne. I can only imagine what infusions he made, for now the bottles stand silent and shut. Eventually, the herbs in the kitchen had to give way to dangerous and expensive drugs.

Footnote: *Alvyn’s eye was trained not only for the bizarre. In New Zealand, on a visit to his mother, he uncovered two very large fashion photographs in an opportunity shop. These were later identified as the work of Mlle Reutlinger, a fashion photographer who pioneered the art in Paris from around 1900 to 1910. Upon Alvyn’s death, these two photographs were bequeathed to the National Gallery of Victoria (permanent collection).*

Originally published in the *Labassa Quarterly*, March – May 1995.