

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 6, Issue 1, 2018



## Hidden voices

### Excerpts from the unpublished diary of Javant Biarujia on Labassa

*The first time I saw Labassa, in 1977, I had no idea I was going to live there just shy of 25 years. I remember turning the corner in Manor Grove and thinking to myself: "A wedding cake surrounded by cupcakes!"*

*The people who lived there were friends of my sister's, Sue Rachmann. I had just come back from a year abroad and so stayed with her in a rented house just down the road from Labassa while I got back on my feet and rented a place of my own. One day, she took me to Labassa to meet her friends, most of whom were artists of some sort: a couple of painters and photographers and several musicians — and everyone seemed to be a film maker.*

*I have always pronounced Labassa as though it were Italian, enunciating each of the As, though as far as I know, nobody knows the origin of the name. In fact, at the beginning I thought the house was called La Bassa, which was how I sometimes wrote it in my diary. However, the Italianate pronunciation has never caught on, for everyone else says Labassa with an Australian bias, where the first A is a schwa and the second and third syllables rhyme with "mass-er" It's similar to the cassel/carsel (castle) divide, I suppose. After all, the house is in Australia and the architecture of this "Grand Victorian" gold-boom mansion is not Italianate but 19<sup>th</sup>-century French Renaissance as envisioned by a German architect, J. A. B. Koch.*

*continued page 2*



**Above:** Javant Biarujia in Labassa's tower, November 1980. **Photo:** Howard Watkinson.

**Javant Biarujia** is the author of two award-winning plays, eight books of poetry and numerous literary essays. He has also kept a diary since 1970 which includes entries from the first time he saw Labassa in 1977 through to 2005 when he was among the last tenants to leave.

This is the first of three annotated diary excerpts covering 1977-85. There are many anachronistic references. Tenant names for the house and its rooms were mostly based on conjecture as to their history. The National Trust later identified rooms according to their documented use. Residents in the 1970s referred to Labassa as "the Manor" and its Drawing Room as the "Ballroom". Before becoming a resident, Javant visited Trevor Stevens in the Old Kitchen (Flat 7) which, at the time, had internal access to the Cellar. [ed.]

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## Hidden voices: excerpts from the unpublished diary of Javant Biarujia (cont.)

*My diaries were never intended to be published, and so were not written with a readership in mind, like so many. Many of the entries would be of no interest to outsiders. I have reprinted here excerpts which I feel may be quirky enough for, or have some topicality to, readers of Labassa Lives. They have been lightly edited for the sake of spelling and punctuation, clarity and consistency, but otherwise stand as they were written. (Page numbers in square brackets indicate where the excerpts can be found in the original diaries which will eventually go to the State Library of Victoria.) The first instalment deals with entries prior to my moving in to Labassa in the late 1970s; the last two instalments cover the early 1980s, when I started living there.*

### Late 1977–1980

**September 23, 1977.** [Non-resident] Robert Burgoyne is known to my cousin through Howard Watkinson and Ann Weir, who are friends of my sister Sue's, living not too far away in an apartment in an old manor [3,214] *My first mention of Labassa.*

**December 10, 1977.** Sue took me to a party in Labassa's cellar last night, reached by steep, rickety stairs from Trevor Stevens' ground-floor flat. The cellar was large with one wall covered by three haunting portraits done by an unknown artist. If you flushed the toilet, water ran down the walls and disappeared somewhere. Sue was talking to her friend Howard, who wore long hair like a hippie and had a Jesus beard. A friend of his, Ivan Durrant, was showing a film of his next week at Labassa, *The Chopping-Block*, where guests at a dinner party had to eat a live turkey once someone agreed to chop its head off. Ann is an artist. She holds life drawing classes in their flat on Tuesday evenings. [3,294–5] [*My cousin was one of the models.*]

**January 8, 1978.** We watched a short, three-minute film that Ann had made. It began in Labassa's downstairs hallway. A man entered carrying a sheaf of sheet music and went up the stairs. It was dark but the stained glass in the window could be clearly seen. He knocked at the top of the stairs but no one answered.



*Above:* Javant Biarujia at the Contemporary Arts Society Annual Exhibition at which Labassa resident Ian Hance was exhibiting, c.1980. *Photo:* John Harland.

### January 8, 1978 [continued]

Somehow the sheet music slipped out of his hands, with the man running down the stairs after it. At the bottom, there was a piano, where the man sat and started playing jazz. Finally, the piano and piano player moved toward the stained-glass front door, which opened to let him and the piano out and then closed again behind them. [3,322] *To this day, Labassa is used in television and film. The top of the staircase at that time was partitioned, so if you stood at the bottom of the "ypsiloid" stairs, the right-hand branch led up to the door of the flat, while the left-hand branch ended with a partition wall.*

**March 24, 1978 (Easter).** A *nuît blanche* at La Bassa [sic] with Trevor Stevens and Howard. It was approaching a full moon, so the sky was a deep blue. We tried to view it from the condemned flat above Trevor's; we went on to the hallway's roof and tried to prise open a window from there. But it was clamped shut. [3,406–7]

**April 17, 1978.** The geodesic dome that friends of Howard's have built is finished and stands in the ballroom [sic] next to Howard's bed. [3,424] *There was already lying on the floor an old red phone box which Howard had dismembered.*

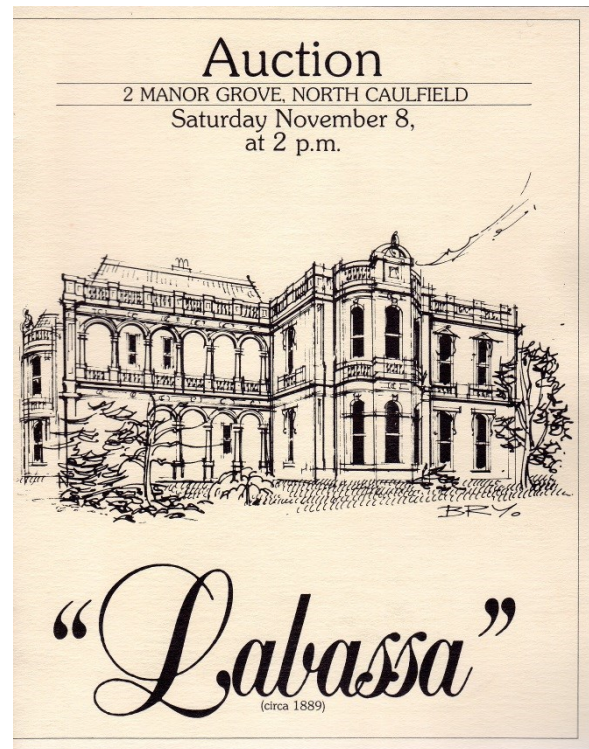
*continued page 3*



## *Hidden voices: excerpts from the unpublished diary of Javant Biarujia (cont.)*

**July, 1979.** Tonight Howard had visitors from the film industry who would like to use his bedroom-cum-studio (Labassa's ballroom [sic]). "This time I'll jack the price up," confided Howard. The room had been used previously in a television commercial for sheets, where a woman lay in bed extolling the sheets' virtues. The actress' heroine was Sarah Barnhardt, and she insisted on her portrait in the room. Crew were busy painting walls and putting up white curtains in the rotund bay window. What Howard had was of no value. When they finished the commercial, they took all the luxury with them. [4,052-3]

**October, 1979.** All the residents of Labassa Manor [sic] live in the uncertainty of dilapidation. Soon the grand old building may be condemned. Because the once magnificent grounds have long since been swallowed up by the ever encroaching suburban homes the Government, Council or National Trust are not interested in restoration despite its historical classification. A fire in Alvyn Davy's apartment upstairs means no one may now use the grand fireplaces. The building is now not insured against fire. The haunting apartment above Trevor has been condemned for some time. [4,213]



*Above:* The brochure for the auction on 8 November, 1980 at which the National Trust successfully bid for Labassa. Javant Biarujia became a tenant four months later. *Donation:* Howard Watkinson.

## Who am I?

This photo was recently donated to Labassa by Pat Dunn, the granddaughter of Emily Brearley, caretaker of the flats from 1921 to 1964.

The photo was taken by Emily Brearley's son Harold Brearley, a regular visitor to Labassa and a keen photographer. Pat Dunn believes that this is one of many photographs he took of residents.

The photo is likely to have been taken before Emily Brearley died in 1964. The girl is wearing a "jumper dress" with a zipper at the front.

Please email [vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au](mailto:vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au) if you are able to identify the girl or have any other information.



## Brief encounters

Labassa offered a “beautiful mansion home” to gentlefolk of means following its conversion into flats in 1920.

This is a snapshot of some of the lesser-known residents between 1921 and 1927. Several had an unexpected reunion in 1929 when they were called to testify at the divorce proceedings of fellow residents Daniel and Lucy Davidson.

### Dora and Gwen Miller

Miss Dora Marjorie Miller is one of a small number of professional women who lived at Labassa in 1922. Labassa was around the corner from Strathfield College, 530 Inkerman Road, where she had been principal for two years. The College was her life’s work and she retired, reluctantly, in 1968 at 80 years of age.

Strathfield started as a kindergarten and school for girls and a preparatory school for “little boys”. In the 1960s it relocated to Dandenong Road and became a pre-school centre. Most of Strathfield’s forty students in 1968 were “hand-ons”, or descendants of previous pupils. The original building in Inkerman Road and the school itself no longer exist.

Dora was fiercely independent, claiming she took over the school because she “didn’t want to be responsible to anyone and wanted to act on my own initiative.” She described her method of teaching as a combination of freedom and discipline. “Children need a firm hand and a good whacking when it’s called for.” Her methods apparently worked as she was credited with the schooling of two Rhodes scholars and the Hon. Barry Owen Jones, AC. According to Dora, Barry Jones had told her that Strathfield was “weird but wonderful”.

Dora shared a flat at Labassa with her sister Ina Gwendolyn, known as “Gwen”, an art teacher at the time. The Millers’ ground floor flat was adjacent to that of Daniel and Lucy Davidson. Gwen became Lucy’s confidant and ally during her volatile marriage. When the Davidsons’ divorce case came before the courts in 1929, Gwen was called to testify. She had noticed Daniel Davidson’s car parked outside Mrs Richards home in St Kilda Road on several occasions and reported this to Lucy.



**Left:**  
Dora Miller.

**Photo:**  
Miller family,  
date unknown.



**Left:**  
Dora Miller on the  
occasion of  
her retire-  
ment, 1968.

**Photo:**  
*The Age*,  
29 August,  
1968, p. 9.

Gwen Miller even helped Lucy to create the alias of “Mrs Miller” so she could visit her husband’s Sydney flat where he was suspected of conducting an affair. Counsel for Daniel Davidson attempted to cast doubt on Gwen’s character and testimony by pointing out that when the Miller sisters left Labassa in 1924, they had moved into a St Kilda boarding house known to be a “sly grog joint”.



## Brief encounters (cont.)



**Left:**  
Mary ("Mollie")  
Webster, resident  
1926-27.

**Right:**  
Phene and Hugh  
Haines who shared  
a flat with daughter  
Mollie and her son  
Thomas.

**Photos:** Jan Webster.



### Mary Bruce Webster

Mary Bruce Webster, known as "Mollie" who lived at Labassa from 1926 until 1927 also testified at the Davidson divorce proceedings. Mollie was a certified nurse and had not only treated the Davidson family but invited them into her flat every Sunday for afternoon tea. Mollie resisted attempts by Daniel Davidson's counsel to confirm any scandalous behavior on the part of his wife Lucy.

### Hugh and Phene Haines

Mollie Webster, a widow, shared her flat with son Thomas, and her parents Hugh and Phene Haines. According to Molly's granddaughter, Jan Webster, Phene inherited money from her father William Henry Lloyd, one of the founders of Dimboola and a Geelong property owner. Hugh and Phene themselves had owned a 160 acre dairy farm called "Wimmera" near the Karlsruhe Railway Station in the Kyneton area, which they sold in 1918.

### Charles and Edith Hayes

As country folk, Phene and Hugh Haines (above right) had a lot in common with fellow residents Charles and Edith Hayes. For Charles and Edith, Labassa was more a conveniently located private hotel than a permanent home.

They regularly travelled to and from their property "Giffan" near Birregurra in the Western District to see their boys, Philip and Geoffrey at Caulfield Grammar School or to spend a day at the races. When the shearing season was about to start they returned to Birregurra and stayed on for the Christmas holidays.

The Hayes' were residents from 1926 to around 1927. After selling "Giffan" they purchased the historic homestead "Elliminook" in 1928.



**Left:**  
Charles and Edith  
Hayes, residents  
1926-27.

**Photo:**  
Sandra Beauchamp.

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## Brief encounters (cont.)

### Detective Percy Lambell

Detective Percy Lambell (right) with the Criminal Investigation Branch in Russell Street, Melbourne is mostly known for his pursuit of the notorious gangster "Squizzy" Taylor.



In October 1923 Lambell, with 11 other armed detectives, raided a house in Barkly Street, St Kilda in search of Angus Murray who had escaped from Geelong Gaol and murdered a Hawthorn bank manager.

Lambell found Squizzy and his girlfriend Ida Pender asleep in bed and charged them with having no visible means of support. Percy's role in investigating and arresting Squizzy was not portrayed in the 2013 TV series *Underbelly: Squizzy Taylor* which was partly filmed at Labassa.

Percy was also the investigating officer for the sensational Mary (Molly) Dean murder at Elwood in 1930. This unsolved murder is the subject of the recently released book *A Scandal in Bohemia* by Gideon Haigh.



**Left:** Squizzy Taylor surrendered to detectives at Russell Street headquarters on 21 September, 1922.

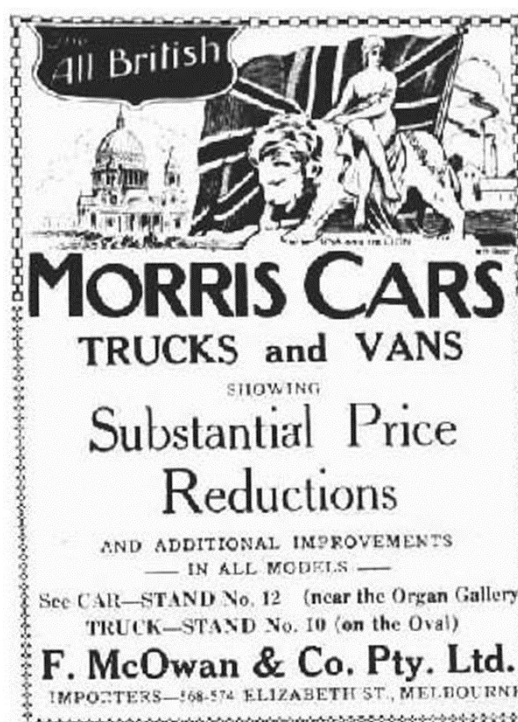
**Photo:** Sun News Pictorial, 22 September, p. 1.

Percy's residency at Labassa, with wife Eleanor, was brief – 1925-26 – during which time he also went on exchange to Sydney for three months.

### Francis and Matilda McOwan

Francis and Matilda McOwan lived at Labassa from around 1925 to 1927. The McOwans were in the motor trade and had showrooms in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. F. McOwan Pty Ltd specialized in the French Vermorel, Morris Oxford and Morris Cowley. They were regular exhibitors at the International Melbourne Motor shows and the Royal Agricultural Society show.

The McOwans were generous donors to various causes. In 1926 they handed over a new Morris Cowley chassis to the motor school of the Working Men's College which was training mechanics for the burgeoning motor industry. Much of their estate was left to the Presbyterian Church, which established the McOwan Farm Boys' Home at Yarra Junction in 1956 for boys aged 14 to 18. There are no known photos of Francis and Matilda.



**Left:** McOwan display ad for the 1926 International Motor Show at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings.

**Photo:** The Herald, 12 May 1926, p. 15.



## Adaptations: Jeff Watkinson

### Resident, Old Laundry, Flat 5, c.1975

The Watkinson brothers from Morwell, Gippsland, discovered Labassa around 1975. John was the first to take up residence in the Old Laundry (Flat 5). Howard moved into the Drawing Room flat (Flat 10) shortly after. Finally, Jeff joined John in Flat 5 later the same year.

To make Flat 5 more homely for John and Jeff, their mother made some new curtains. After a couple of years of putting up with bare floorboards, partly covered in old rugs, Jeff made the flat even more liveable by investing \$700 to carpet the bare boards and installing light dimmers.

Jeff bought four ferns for the courtyard at their front door which later became a burial plot for Buzzard, his short-lived budgie. He also confesses to planting some “weed” in the garden which was uprooted by another tenant worried that it might result in a police raid.

Like many tenants before him, Jeff adapted what was available to suit his needs. He found a fireplace mantle “somewhere in the house” and installed it over the fireplace – upside down because he thought it fitted the shape of the existing design.

Tenants no longer used the communal laundry attached to the Willas Flats so he used it as a photographic darkroom. Jeff says “it was pretty amazing to be able to hold a print in my hand within an hour of taking a shot”.

The telephone inside the former communal telephone booth outside Flat 5 was long gone and this curious box became a convenient storage space.

Flat 5 was the smallest flat at Labassa and accordingly had a modest rent of \$17.50 a week which was shared with Trevor Stevens before he moved into the Old Kitchen flat (Flat 7).

Everyone seemed to be making films at Labassa in the late '70s and Jeff filmed some scenes for brother Howard's film *La Vie Ignoble*.

Jeff also made an unscripted appearance in one of Russell D. Clarke's films when Labassa's back fence caught fire and he stepped in to help quench the flames with a garden hose.



*Above:* Jeff Watkinson fighting a fire along Labassa's back fence. *Image:* Russell D. Clarke.

Jeff was among the tenants who gathered on the balcony on 8 November 1980 to see Labassa auctioned. “While looking down at the massive crowd below listening to the auctioneer, suddenly everyone looked up and laughed. I looked next to me and one of the tenants came out onto the balcony wrapped in a blanket with a brass planter on his head regally waving at the crowd. It was a classic moment!” Jeff recalls.

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Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome. Please forward to:  
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PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,  
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

## Forthcoming Open Days 2018

Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, 10.30am—4.00pm)

June 17

October 21

July 15

November 18

August 19

December 9

September 16

## *Stranded by Nervous System*

1986, 16mm, duration 4.36

One of Labassa's "lost" films was recently recovered thanks to ex-resident Stephen Hall and clip producer/donor Jim Nicolaides. The music clip includes a short sequence of a belly dancer performing in Labassa's Music Room.

The following background on the making of the clip was provided by ex-resident Russell D. Clarke who filmed and edited *Stranded*.

"The song was trying to convey isolation and loneliness in the main character played by Jim Nicolaides who was also the producer and co-writer of the song. It had a middle-eastern theme, thus there are many shots of deserts, old Egyptian ruins and pyramids at the start. It took about three months to find the location for the sand dunes alone. Jim and I drove all over Victoria and eventually found some dunes on the border of South Australia. Jim had friends play the Arabians in this short scene.

The whole clip took about twelve months to complete in 1986. I was cameraman, did the lighting, and was co-director and assistant editor to Jim. Stephen Hall and other friends helped in some larger production shots like the evening shoot at a bistro in the city.

The locations included a hotel in South Yarra, a bistro in the city (whose name escapes me) and Hawksburn Station at the end. Resident, Howard Watkinson was able to get me access to the Port Melbourne Telstra phone exchange to film the young girl in the clip. That was in the days before computerised exchanges.



Miriam Gregory in Flat 2 allowed Jim and I to film the belly dancer in the Music Room (above). There were a lot of candles used to light the shot. I wanted it to be atmospheric. Jim distorted the belly dancer in the editing process to enhance the soundtrack. It's quite difficult to see the room but it was a relatively short scene."