

Labassa *lives*

Volume 6, Issue 2, 2018

Patriotism and politics

There were few signs in 1939 that residents Lydia and Alex Buchanan would become a political couple. Their business as wholesale suppliers to the hair and beauty industry was struggling due to war restrictions. After a motor vehicle accident that year, in which both were injured, the company went into terminal decline.

The Buchanans were returning to Labassa from Adelaide when a five ton truck turned in front of their new four-seater sports car. Lydia who suffered chest and facial injuries spent several months in an Adelaide hospital.

Lydia's recovery was slow and although Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony flat) had only two main rooms, the Buchanans employed a woman to come in 11.30am to 7.30pm each day to do the housework and help Lydia dress.

When Lydia was interviewed by Friend of Labassa Diane Arnold nearly 50 years later, she still recalled the decorative features of their flat. The wallpaper in the front room was in subtle tones of pale green. There had been matching wall lights on the south wall between the windows. The original light fittings were missing and only the round wooden bases remained.

Flat 6 came with the best bathroom, the 1890 Master Bathroom, which was in near original condition in 1939. Lydia recalled that the toilet cistern was housed in red cedar and the handle at the end of the chain was in the form of two entwined serpents.

The wash basin consisted of a swinging bowl which was one piece of marble but which could be tipped to drain the water. It sat in another marble basin enclosed in a red cedar cabinet which went to the floor.

The bath was made of copper also housed in red cedar. Three jets of water in a semi-circular arrangement provided a shower in the bath.



Above: Alex Buchanan, Member for McMillan, 1955-72.

Photo: Crowther, National Archives of Australia.

Beside the bath on the floor was a draining board which was beautifully constructed from many pieces of wood dove-tailed together. This sat in a lead tray to collect drips.

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Patriotism and politics (cont.)



Right:
Lydia Buchanan.
(Cropped section
of group photo
on the left.)



Above (standing on Labassa's veranda, left to right): Emily Brearley (Caretaker); William O'Callaghan (Owner of Labassa); Lydia Buchanan; Unidentified woman; Violet Miller; Isabella (Dot) Ede; Annie Chadwick; Pat Brearley, (grand daughter of Emily Brearley) presenting flowers to Barbara Morris, Victorian Red Cross Divisional Commandant.

Photo: Pat Dunn. Note: Since this photo was published in *Labassa Lives* Vol. 2 No. 1, all but one person has been identified.

The Buchanans added their own decorative touch to the bathroom by installing deep red linoleum on the floor to match the colour of the Minton wall tiles.

By late 1940 Lydia had sufficiently recovered to join the Labassa Branch of the Australian Comforts Fund (ACF). As Honorary Secretary she helped to organise fundraisers at Labassa and at other properties such as Rotherfield, a 45-room mansion in Elwood now known as Sherwood Hall.

The Labassa Branch also had a stall in the Melbourne Town Hall on 23 May 1941 as part of the Empire Day drive for the ACF. The largest Labassa Branch effort by far, however, was a fete held in the grounds in 1942. The elegant Mrs Buchanan is pictured on the western veranda with other members of the organising committee (see above).

Alex joined the Royal Australian Navy Volunteer Reserve in 1942. In an interview with former parliamentarian Gordon Bryant in 1984, he confessed that these were not his best years. Alex didn't like the discipline and when asked to go to Darwin refused. In 1943 Alex requested, and was granted, a discharge on the grounds incompatibility.

When Robert Menzies formed the Liberal Party in late 1944, the Buchanans were among the founding members. They moved out of Labassa after the Second World War and bought a 52 acre mixed farm at Beaconsfield within what would become the Federal electorate of McMillan.

Alex became a Liberal Party organiser for the electorate and after the sitting member died in 1955, was endorsed as the new Liberal candidate.

Although Alex Buchanan held the seat for 17 years he lost Liberal Party endorsement in 1972. He did not go quietly and was expelled from the Party for nominating against the new Liberal candidate as an independent. Alex's preferences delivered victory to the Country Party candidate.

Right: Lydia Buchanan who was described by *The Age* as one of the "personalities" attending the Liberal Country Party Conference on 4 August 1949.

Image: *The Age*, 5 August 1949, p. 3.



The gardener's son

By Andrew Lemon*

In all the extraordinary Labassa lives unearthed by Vicki Shuttleworth, is there one to outdo the life of the son of the head gardener?

The only problem is that some of the story cannot be true. Alan Cooper was a fantasist all his life, and his own autobiography does not stand up to strict historical scrutiny.

What is true is that Alan Cooper used charm and guile to seek access to wealth and influence. He imported and drove racing cars and risked his life on the track. He briefly ran a huge coal company. He paid a record Australian price for a racehorse, on a whim. He acquired one of Australia's most famous stud farms. He became a compulsive gambler. He ended his career as a chauffeur in Canberra.

It is also true that his father was George Cooper, head gardener at Labassa in the period when it was Ontario. The garden under Cooper was, by all accounts, one of the finest in greater Melbourne. (See *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 3 No. 2, August 2015).

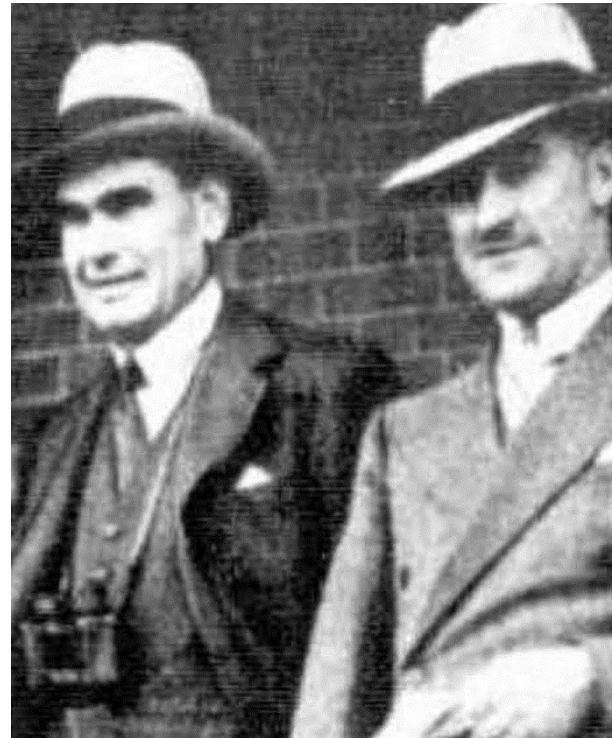
So can it be true, the story Alan Cooper told of his miraculous survival as a baby? He credits Ontario's owner Alexander Robertson with saving his life – but the dates don't add up. Or did he mean Robertson's brother in his new garden in Toorak? This is what Alan Cooper wrote, forty years after the fact:

'I was born a twin on November 17 1898 at Glen Eira Road Caulfield - the twelfth child... My twin brother lived only six hours. The doctors studied my tiny form - just on three pounds - put their stethoscopes in the tails of their coats and turned their thumbs down. My father, George Cooper, went to his work as head gardener at the home of Mr Robinson [sic - he meant Robertson] of Robinson and Wagner, owners of the famous Cobb and Co. coaching firm, with such a long face that he attracted his employer's attention.

' "What's the trouble, Cooper?"

' "One boy dead, the other dying," lamented my father.

' "Dying nothing!" cried Robinson. "Home at once, man, and wrap the little fellow in cotton wool soaked with whisky."



Above: "Was Alan a Happy Man?". Mr Alan Cooper (right) is the owner of Wise Boy, who won the Breeders' Plate. He and bloodstock salesman Mr Clive Inglis were snapped together at Randwick on Monday.

Image: Published with above heading and caption in *Sydney Sportsman*, 6 October 1934, p.11.

'My father returned home at the gallop, wool under one arm, whisky under the other, and soon I was enveloped in the tastiest swaddling clothes any new-born babe ever had... Six months after my birth my father had drunk the remainder of the bottle which had saved my life and become head gardener and foreman at the Melbourne Botanical Gardens.'

Alas for this wonderful story, Alexander Robertson had died in 1896, two years before Alan Cooper's birth: the Robertsons no longer lived at Ontario.

It is certainly true that George Cooper, Alan's dad, went on to manage the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne, and here Alan spent his enterprising boyhood.

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The gardener's son (cont.)

By his own account he earned half sovereigns easily by ingratiating himself with wealthy gentlemen with botanical interests who came to talk rare plants with his father. He would, he said, whip out his shirt tails and polish their boots. Throughout his life he was a risk taker and a man with an eye to the main chance. For a long time the strategy worked.

The First World War broke out when Alan was sixteen. He joined the AIF when he was eighteen, and briefly served in France as a driver. As a slender, athletic twenty-one year old soldier returning to Australia at the end of the war, Alan swiftly won his way into the affections of bachelor Stephen Brown, one of the richest men in Australia, thirty years older than he.

Stephen and his brothers owned lucrative coal mines and pastoral properties in New South Wales. For the next two decades Alan accompanied Stephen in travelling the world and spending his money. Their adventures took them to India, Italy, Spain, France, England and the USA.

Years later, when the good times stopped rolling, Alan Cooper sold his life story for £500 to the Sydney paper *Smith's Weekly* where it was laid out in lurid instalments.

Until the two went their separate ways in 1938, Alan had free access to Stephen Brown's bank account, with Stephen's blessing. Years later, in a court case, Alan was accused of losing a fortune. Alan's response was that he had not *lost* a fortune, he had *spent* a fortune, and it was his job to do so.

The Alan Cooper story is too long and too absurdly complex to sketch even in brief. I haven't even mentioned King Alfonso XIII or American gangsters, maharajahs, expensive Italian clothes, or the hatred of Alan enacted by Stephen's eccentric older brother, John Brown. After his partnership with Stephen ended, Cooper was lonely. He swiftly married, on an impulse.

Along the way Alan helped kick along the career of at least one of his brothers. Hal Cooper also drove racing cars, and later owned and trained Grey Boots to win the 1956 Caulfield Cup.



Above: Cartoon published in *Smith's Weekly*, 5 April, 1947, p. 7, depicting Alan Cooper as a boy. Alan claimed to have earned half sovereigns by ingratiating himself with wealthy gentlemen who came to talk rare plants with his father, George Cooper, Head Gardener at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens. Alan said he would whip out his shirt tails and polish their boots.

As for the last chapter in Alan Cooper's story? His career spiralled downwards. He tried chicken farming and horse training but nothing stuck. Did his marriage endure? If so, Kathleen Cooper must have been a woman of prodigious fortitude, as he ran up big debts in her name. A libel case by Alan against Packer's Consolidated Press could have paid some bills but was dismissed. He disappeared from public view. His last paid job was as driver in Canberra for the High Commissioner of Ceylon. Alan Cooper died in 1974.

I would love to write his story. If anyone can shed more light on the tale of Labassa's gardener's whisky-swaddled youngest son, let me know.

***Andrew Lemon is a historian. He is currently completing a company history of Sydney-based bloodstock agents William Inglis and Son Ltd. Andrew lived at Labassa 1975-78.**

Hidden voices: 1980–81

This is the second instalment of three annotated excerpts from resident **Javant Biarujia's** diaries. The first instalment was published in *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2018, pp 1-3. Page numbers in square brackets indicate where the excerpts can be found in the original diaries

I was 25 when I moved in to Labassa on 1 March 1981. Of course, I had no idea that I would one day live there. My flat used to be home to Mr and Mrs Halford, much older than the rest of the residents and who kept largely to themselves. I moved in a year or so after Mrs Halford's death. I launched my first solo book of poetry there (see August 8, 1981; "her peeling walls / of patterned paper beneath 50s color schemes", comes from an unpublished poem where "she" is, of course, Mrs Halford).

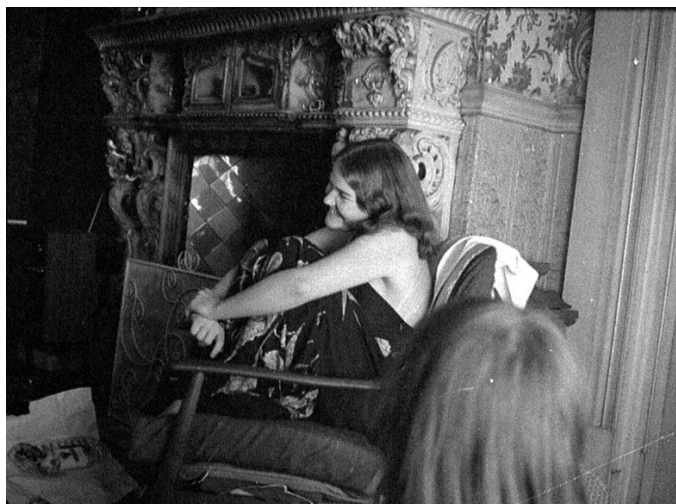
In retrospect, I am so pleased Labassa was bought by the National Trust, though at the time I didn't attend the auction, for I felt, along with many others, that the house was going to fall victim to a developer who would soon demolish it and build something new.

May, 1980. [Non-resident] Steve McNeilly played Puck in the Labassa production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Sept 77* when I had just come back to Melbourne and I was too tired to go, so I spent the evening with Trevor and my sister Sue [at his flat in the Servants' Quarters at Labassa]. He must have been there on the crowded balcony. [4,500]

** In preparing this for publication, I see that December 9, 1977, is the more likely date (see above).*

November, 1980. Labassa sold at auction for \$282,000 to the National Trust. My friends there breathed a sigh of relief as the Trust is broke and unlikely to evict them in the near future.

I did not go to the auction. I could not bear anything as funereal as that. Apparently Howard, Robert Burgoyne, Ian Hance [a painter, who maintained a studio at Labassa and in July, 1982, moved in], Jeff Watkinson, Sue Furze and Russell Clarke sat on Ian's balcony during the auction with the auctioneer below them on Johnny Kesselschmidt's veranda cheering the conservatively dressed gentleman who turned out to be bidding on the Trust's behalf.



Above: Javant's sister, Sue Rachmann with whom he published his first solo book of poetry at Labassa in 1981.

Photo: John Harland.

For weeks beforehand the Manor [sic] was besieged by hordes of people wanting to inspect it, obeying none of the decencies and courtesies one would expect to be extended to the inhabitants. All their lives were disrupted by sudden appearances of tourists, speculators, investors, restorers, heritors, neighbors into their kitchens, lounges, living rooms. It was the end of privacy. A shut door became an object of desire: all doors had to be opened. Although there was to be no actual inspection on the day of the auction a multitude tramped through the halls like rats *en masse* migrating from one sewer to another. [4,720]

November, 1980. Howard takes a number of shots of me on the rooftop of the Manor [sic]. [4,754]

February, 1981. Tonight Howard will show me Flat 4 at Labassa Manor [sic]. It will be vacant March, a medium-sized apartment \$89 per month. (The rent is low because Labassa is classified substandard housing). [4,919]

Early March, 1981. Labassa Manor [sic]. Decadence. I shall exult in it then. Living at Labassa means TV cameras almost every day, tourists, school-children drawing, receptions downstairs for dignitaries. [4,938 & 4,976]

March 28–29, 1981. Labassa open to the public [for the first time], but I was safe from the hordes upstairs. I watched them for a while from my balcony. [4,984]

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Hidden voices: 1980-81 (cont.)

Late March, 1981. With it raining I listen for drips from leaks in the roof. Tonight the main stairwell is wet from a leak. Settling in at Labassa. A tranquil feeling. A good atmosphere. Slowly transforming the apartment. [4,985]

May, 1981. Alvyn Davy's room [*at Labassa*] is crammed with oddities, even though he recently sold off most of his things. Everywhere you look there is something unusual; at times, delightful; at other times, nasty or macabre. I could say the room tells a lot about him, but that is too predictable. (I have learnt of his distaste for predictability.) Paintings range from a small bloody portrait of Christ crucified, by Alvyn himself, an erect penis by a former priest, a mad carnival face, an example of kitchensink art, some fine drawings, a salon painting of late last century, depicting the *sortie* of operagoers, and an exquisite piece of embroidery with a classical theme. There is a vase of arrows, a human skull, empty snail shells, two white plaques (marble or alabaster?) of cherubim, tiny cameos, many cloths. The most sensational piece is a doll's head with wild hair stained red at the front, and made up with fucus. [5,101]

This entry was used as a basis for "My Friend Alvyn Davy [1950-1993]", published in Labassa Quarterly in 1995 and reprinted in Labassa Lives last year.

August 8, 1981. Launch of *Warrior Dolls* at my apartment at Labassa. Huge party — more than 200 people. Great success. For the first time I enjoyed one of my own parties. Great diversity of people. So many staggered by this — streetarab to nobility, communist to royalist,* punk to disco, juvenile to octogenarian, bohemian to bourgeois, radical to conservative, unemployed to professional. Alvyn spent two days making the superb floral decorations. [5,195]

* Frank Hardy was the "communist". Hardy had formed a writers' group called *Carringbush Writers*, which sometimes met in my flat at Labassa. A guest at the launch asked to be introduced to Hardy: "What do you think of [the bombings associated with] the Richmond elections?" "If you read 'The Age' this morning, you would know what I thought." Frank at his most curt. [5,197]

November, 1981. "Labassa is one of the most important mansions in Australia, particularly for its interiors, which are richly decorated and finely executed. Only a handful of 19th century houses in Australia survive with their original decoration intact." — From a National Trust publication.



Above: Alvyn Davy in his room with Ian Biarujia (formerly Birks). *Photo:* Javant Biarujia.

My apartment comprises the upstairs of the Eastern wing [*the Master Bedroom and ancillary rooms*]. The largest room affords a spacious bay window addressing the Eastern suburbs as far as the Dandenong Ranges, always cobalt on the horizon. It is set in an archway with mouldings of acanthus, nuts and flowers. The windows are curved. Two brass gas lamps protruding from the alcove walls. My South window overlooks Ian's balcony, and below a tiny portion of the garden: magnolia, wattle, fuchsia, hydrangea, daisy bushes, azalea and many bulb plants and annuals. The hall is dark and gloomy. It is the only area of my apartment which still bears the original wallpaper. The end room has a partition wall, making the partition[ed room] a perfect square, which I have transformed into my bedroom. From the high ceiling I hung a silken parachute which turns old gold from the overhead light. I covered the walls completely with handblocked Persian cloth — intricate rivulets of flowers, leaves, birds and grapes. Heavy blue brocade curtains, two small cane bookcases, the large bed with handblocked Persian bedspread, a glass and chrome bedside table with bedside lamp atop.

I enjoy very much living here — I never give a thought to the possibility of having to move because of the Trust's restoration work. [Labassa] has a long history of colorful residents — and at one stage I thought of documenting them — but I was warned it was "too hot to handle". This year the house was twice open to the public (upstairs is cordoned off) and has appeared in a number of magazines, plus one inane article in *The Age*. [5,344-5 & 5,348]

Out of the shadows

Period photographs can capture features of Labassa no longer in plain sight.



The hidden ceiling

Left: This early 1920s photo of two unidentified women has captured a stencilled ceiling above the balcony.

Above: What remains of this ceiling has been hidden beneath a hardboard cover for at least 56 years. This ceiling also makes an appearance in an earlier photo taken by the Watson family c.1908. (Reference: State Library of Victoria, Image H98.221/7.)

Could this be Labassa's stables?

CAULFIELD STABLE AS FLATS



It is proposed to turn this stable at Caulfield into self-contained flats to meet the local housing shortage.—“Herald.”

Above left: This photo story appeared in the *Herald*, 10 July, 1924 shortly after the Caulfield Council Works Committee recommended 9 Manor Grove be converted into flats. There are striking similarities between this building and diagrams of the stables in the MMBW Survey Books (1897) and MMBW Plan 1431 (1901) which is reproduced in *Labassa: A grand Victorian mansion*, p. 14.



Above right: This photo of 9 Manor Grove c.1983, was taken before the flats were converted into a single dwelling. Note the structural similarities with the first photo.

Architect John Koch's 1889-90 refurbishment of Labassa (then Ontario) included a new stable block which was destroyed by fire along with four valuable carriage horses in 1892. The architect for the rebuild is unknown.

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Forthcoming Open Days 2018

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome. Please forward to:
vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or
PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

10.30am—4.00pm

September 16

December 9 (Christmas opening)

October 21

November 18

Out of the shadows (cont.)**The “old cupboard” and the olive tree**

Left: Labassa’s telephone booth, pictured in the background, was located on the veranda outside Flat 5 (the Old Laundry) for at least 35 years. The coin-operated telephone (number U3523) was used by both Labassa and Willas residents until the mid 1960s when it became a storage cupboard. The booth survives only as a ghostly outline on the veranda tiles.

The olive tree (left of frame) was planted by residents in 1969. During a wild party one of Labassa’s newel post lamps went missing. When a dispute broke out among tenants over who was to blame, Julie Ryan bought an olive tree, a traditional symbol of peace and friendship. All the residents were invited to gather in the rear courtyard where Judith Cordingley and Hartmut Erdmann carried out the ceremonial planting.

Above (left to right): Tascha Edwards, Matthew Sproul, Julie Edwards, c.1974. *Photo:* Ian Sproul.

The picture gallery

Original Photo: Graeme Butler.

The above photo, taken by heritage architect Graeme Butler in the 1980s, offers a rare view of the hallway and the bathroom annexe for Flat 2. The annexe was demolished by the National Trust during restoration works.

Residents sometimes painted or decorated Labassa’s bland partitions. This photo shows a large framed image and several smaller works attached to the partition wall. The first image is the original. The image above has been adjusted to highlight the artworks.