

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 6, Issue 3, 2018

## Childhood idyll



**Above:** Circa 1947, Flat 10 residents Joan and John Manton in Labassa's western rockery.

**Photo:** Margaret Manton.

After 14 years in Labassa's Drawing Room flat<sup>1</sup>, the Chadwicks, Tom (90) and Annie (82) were moving into a private hotel. Their departure in 1947 brought momentous change to the household.

As the venue for innumerable charity fundraisers and meetings of Labassa's Red Cross Comforts Fund, Flat 10 had become the centre of the household's social life.

News of the Chadwicks' departure was quickly passed on to Joan Manton by her mother Vi Miller who had been a Labassa resident.

Joan and her husband John were living with his parents in near by Ontario Street. While this arrangement suited them when John was on active service during the War, it was time to establish their own home.

Before moving into Flat 10, the Mantons bought some of the Chadwick furniture, most of which was auctioned onsite by Leonard Joel in March 1947.

Joan and John would have found a very settled household in this immediate post-war period. Most of the long-term tenants were still in residence – Dot and Syd Ede, Ivy and Claude Kingston, Helen Rodgers, Jeanie Thomas, Maie Brown and, of course, caretaker Emily Brearley.

Their simple lifestyle was defined by prevailing war restrictions and ration coupons that had to be used for basics such as clothing, tea, butter and meat. Deliveries by horse and cart were still used for ice, bread and green groceries.

The tranquillity of the household was broken over the next five years as European migrants with young children moved in upstairs. Labassa had its own baby boom to which the Mantons contributed with the birth of daughter Margaret in 1949, followed by son Russell in 1952.

<sup>1</sup> Flat 10 comprised the Drawing Room, Boudoir, Butler's Pantry and Silver Room.

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*Childhood idyll (cont.)*

*Above (left to right):* Karen Gillespie (Ontario Flats resident), Margaret Manton and Flat 3 resident Eva Traurig outside Flat 10 on the Western lawn. **Photo:** Margaret Manton.



*Above (left to right):* Russell, Joan and Margaret Manton in Labassa's front garden. **Photo:** Margaret Manton.



*Above:* Margaret Manton circa 1953.  
**Photo:** Margaret Manton.

John Manton was a buyer in the wool industry and frequently travelled interstate. Labassa was a safe, supportive family environment for Joan and the children during his absences. Joan, for example, left baby Russell with elderly resident Percy Spencer when she went shopping.

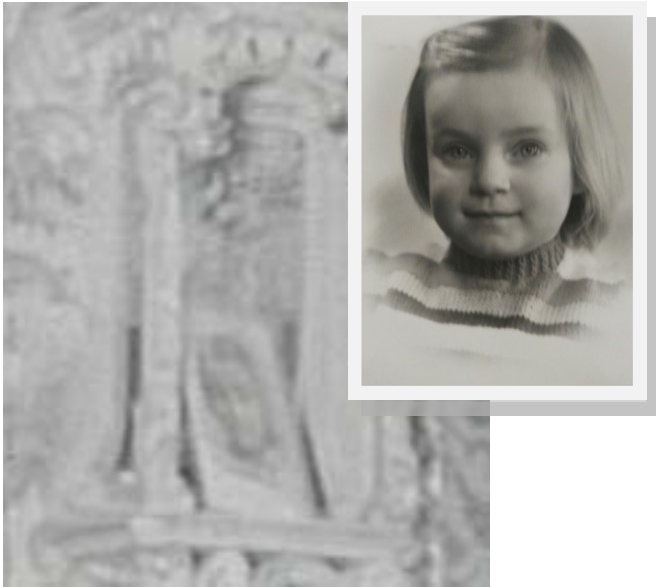
Margaret recalls that it was a lovely place to live and play. "It was idyllic for children. There were lots of places to play and lots of playmates at Labassa and in Manor Grove," she says. Margaret mostly played with Eva Traurig, who was around the same age.

"There were many young families trying to get established," Margaret says. "The different cultures, the food and the smells were just amazing."

The children were very respectful of caretaker Mrs Emily Brearley. "We were aware of her looking after the house. She worked really hard to keep it immaculate. Our parents told us not to play or make any noise in the hall and to be careful with the wood-work." Margaret would sometimes follow Mrs Brearley and watch her go down to the cellar to stoke the furnace that supplied hot water to the flats.

In 1956, an inheritance made it possible for Joan and John to buy their own family home. The Mantons, as mementos of their happy days at Labassa, took two amber glass servants' bell pushes from the Drawing Room flat. One push became the front doorbell on their new family home. Margaret Manton arranged for its return to Labassa in 2013. (See *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2013, p. 6.)

## Girl in the frame



**Above:** Screen shot from 1958 ABC production *Panorama* showing a photo of Maria Correlje on the Boudoir mantel. **Inset:** Maria Correlje, the girl in the frame, who has now told her family's story. **Photos:** This photo and all others in the story are courtesy of Maria Bailey (nee Correlje).

Rare footage from an ABC *Panorama* program broadcast in 1958 enables us to document major architectural changes to Labassa. The brolgas and urns on the parapet are gone and the flats to the west are under construction.

The film also raises questions about who was living in the mansion at this time. So far, no one has been able to identify two girls and an elderly man on the veranda. And, who was the girl in the photo on the Boudoir mantel?

Maria Correlje was only 11 when television presenter Corrine Kirby and the ABC arrived. She and her playmates excitedly tagged along as the crew moved from location to location. The ABC even filmed the Correlje's lounge room, now known as the Boudoir. There on the rococo mantel along with assorted ornaments is a framed photo of Maria herself.

The Correlje family — Lambert Johan (Bert), Tonie and their children Hans and Maria — were among 1900 Dutch migrants who arrived in Australia on the *Fairsea* in October 1952. Their home city, Rotterdam, was heavily blitzed during the Second World War and like most migrants they had come for a better life.

Maria does not know how the family came to rent Flat 10 in 1957. The Drawing Room was certainly adequate for their family of two adults and three children. At some point the Drawing Room had been partitioned into three living spaces — the South Bay end for Bert and Tonie, a 'room' adjacent to the doorway into the hall for 17-year-old Hans and a 'room' in the West Bay window shared by Maria and her brother Jim who was born in Australia in 1953.

None of these partitions went all the way to the ceiling and privacy was limited. By the time the family left, Hans would have his own bedroom in the former Silver Room.

Maria recalls the Drawing Room as being a magical space. "The decoration on the rococo wall panels was all gold. My father joked that had he known he probably would have scrapped it off with a knife and sold it!"

The West Bay window where Maria and Jim slept was sometimes used for birthday parties and their young guests were very aware that this was a special place compared to their more conventional homes.

One night Maria, then 12, woke to see the ghostly face of a man with long hair looking through an etched glass pane of the Boudoir door. She was so frightened she ran into her Mum and Dad's room and slept with them for the rest of the night. The apparition did not return.

A more prosaic surprise came with the discovery of the old wine cellar under their bathroom floor. "The bath tub flooded one day and Dad pulled up the lino to dry the floor and found the cellar."

One of the joys of Labassa was having other children to play with, which included Rachel and Manes Apfelbaum from Flat 4 upstairs.

As a rule, downstairs children were not allowed to go past the first stairway landing. In any case, caretaker Mrs Brearley was often on the staircase with shovel and brush in hand. "She was always cleaning and polishing on the staircase. The iron balusters just shone."

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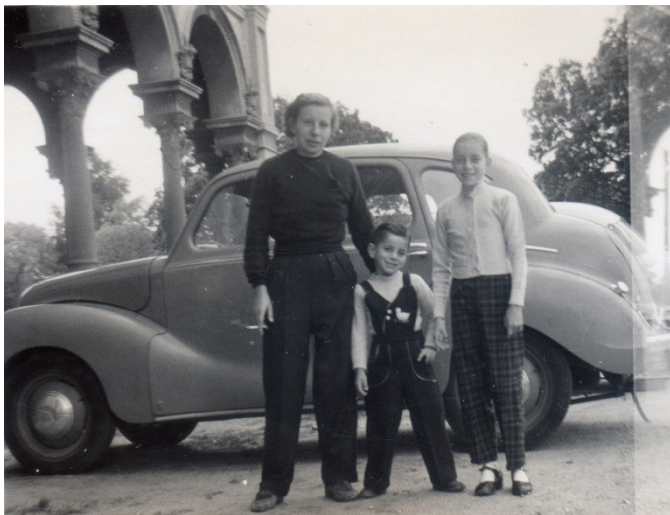
## Girl in the frame (cont.)



*Above:* Correlje family lounge (Boudoir).



*Above right:* Bert Correlje (left) and friends party in the Boudoir.



*Above (left to right):* Tonie Correlje with Jim and Maria in Labassa's front 'carpark'. The negative for this photo was double exposed causing a partial duplication of the image on the right.



Maria has only fleeting memories of the adult residents, including the mysterious Claude and Ivy Kingston and Ivy's sister Helen Rodgers.

Although these British migrants lived in Flat 2<sup>1</sup> for over 30 years they had no children and no one to pass on their photos and stories. "Every Sunday we would go out to play in the courtyard and the two women would be sitting there drying their hair."

Maria also recalls widow Dot Ede who lived in Flat 8<sup>2</sup> across the hallway: "My mother was very friendly with Mrs Ede and if Mum wasn't at home I would go to her."

Just before they departed in 1961, a dramatic change came to the Correlje's grand home. Owners Wolf and Hinda Kazer started to build a double-storey house in the front garden. Flat 10's front bay window now looked out on a tall paling fence.

"The tenants were mad that such an eyesore had been put in front of this beautiful building. Even Caulfield Tech people complained because they used to come and draw the house."

<sup>1</sup> Flat 2 comprised the Billiard and Music rooms, Smoking Lounge and Porch.

<sup>2</sup> Flat 8 comprised the Dining Room and a bathroom and kitchen annexe in the rear courtyard.

*Left:* Children's party in the Drawing Room's West Bay. Maria is seated second from the right next to Flat 4 resident Manes Apfelbaum on the far right.

## Hidden voices: 1982–85

This is the third and final instalment of annotated excerpts from resident **Javant Biarujia's** diaries. Page numbers in square brackets indicate where the excerpts can be found in the original diaries.

*In 1982, my sister Sue Rachmann and I established the small publishing house Nosukumo — pronounced “noh-SOO-koo-moh” — in my flat at Labassa; Ian Biarujia came a year later — because there are two Ians, I shall refer to him as Ian B. here). It was simply an extension of the house’s creativity. Nosukumo lived its entire life at Labassa, specialising in the publication of poetry and cultural criticism, which we sometimes launched at Labassa, until we ceased publishing in 1996. (However, in 1993, we “commercially” published for The Friends of Labassa a book of recipes titled Tasty Treats from the Tea Room, as a fund-raiser for the house.)*

*The National Trust removed all the partitions in Labassa by 1985, which had been there since the house was turned into separate flats approximately sixty years beforehand, and so all of the tenants in the main part of the house had to leave. Because Flat 4 was self-contained (i.e., it had its own bathroom and kitchen), Ian B. and I were allowed to stay.*

*The last entry here shows my anxiety on what might happen to Labassa. What I feared happening hasn’t. Both the histories of the original 19<sup>th</sup>-century owners plus the landlords and tenants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been recognised, which I understood was not the case originally, and the conserved house is open to the public the third Sunday of most months. I left Labassa in August, 2005, with my partner, Ian Biarujia, a Life Member of The Friends of Labassa who ended up living there almost as long as I. Although we no longer live at Labassa, it will always remain in our hearts.*

**April, 1982.** I designed a colophon for Nosukumo, which I designed by letting my eye rove over the fireplace and my kimono hanging on the adjacent wall. Labassa is like a haven. It came to me as a godsend. Of course I found Labassa enchanting. I thought it decadent in its opulence and with its offbeat residents — all belonging in the world of art. Three and a half years later it was my turn to inhabit what had become in a single house the Montparnasse of Melbourne. [5,406–7 & 5,409–11]



Above: Javant at home (Master Bedroom, Flat 4), April 1983.

Photo: Steve Broadhurst.

**November, 1982.** Stephen Hall, who lives downstairs in what were once the servants’ quarters and cellar, is moving out in a month’s time. Stephen is one of the oldest tenants still here at Labassa. He has lived upstairs and downstairs, in the cellar, in the tower, in the ballroom [sic] and the backroom. Every nook and cranny is known to him, every niche, every cubby. He is the last vestige of the hippie mythos. He paints and writes. He reads voraciously or not at all. His favorite poet is Paul Éluard. To think of Stephen separate from Labassa Manor [sic] is unthinkable. [5,650] Stephen is still a painter and now manages an art gallery in Mullimbimby, New South Wales. He continues to contribute generously to Labassa’s ongoing history project.

**April, 1983.** Alvyn has moved from Labassa. As he arrived in fire (he lit a fire in the fireplace of his room at Labassa and almost burnt the manor down in the process), he left in fire. Stephen took his discarded belongings out back and made a bonfire. The back fence caught alight and most of the morning-glory creeper was destroyed. [5,732]

**May 5, 1983.** “My sister had just turned on the TV to watch ‘Dr Who’ but got a programme called ‘Home’. Max Gillies was playing a rag and bone man living in an old deserted house (haunted I might add) that had been taken over by the National Trust, and guess which house, Labassa. It showed the entrance hall, the room to the left of the front door [Drawing Room] and your place from the outside.” — From a letter from a friend. [5,747]

*continued page 6*



*Hidden voices: 1982-85 (cont.)*

**June, 1983.** The National Trust has completely removed the magnificent stained glass windows from the landing for restoration, and has bandaged the hole with transparent polythene. The front hall is now lighter, but quite lacking in character. The chill winds of winter rip through the gaps and tear away parts of the polythene replacement. The house is so much colder now. [5,798]

**December 8, 1983.** Torrential rains. The roof leaks in the small Persian bedroom. The bed is soaked and the color in one of the Isfahani cotton wallhangings runs. Ian B. and I are forced to empty the tiny room out — the only room to subjugate Labassa's personality. [6,108]

**July, 1984.** Labassa is a kind of sanctuary for me. I feel a protective warmth and sustenance.

Work has begun on restoration by the National Trust. First, the sullied walls and ceilings are painstakingly cleaned until the colors, not so nearly faded as first thought, are revealed. Second, they are retouched and regilded. Furniture and fittings are being returned by people who have "safeguarded" them over the years. The brass and etched glass lanterns are reinstalled in the front hallway. The partition beside the front stairs is removed, opening up the full splendor of the staircase which had been blocked for sixty years. A late extension of bathroom and kitchen — put in when the house became tenanted — has been demolished, revealing underneath the original well, whose water is still miraculously clear. (It was still being fed rain water despite its concealment.) The parquet is polished, and lights are put in to highlight its splendor. [6,509-10]

**August, 1984.** Robin Boyd mentions Labassa in his *Australian Ugliness* as a rare example of grace under threat from the encroaching ugliness of property developers. [6,693]

**February, 1985.** James Coburn and the film crew of *The Leonsky Incident* packed up their set in the drawing room by seven o'clock and were gone from Labassa. They left behind the thick smell of church incense which permeated the whole house. Sue had her divorce party that evening. She said to the director of the film that it was such a cheap smell, but then the set was a servicemen's brothel; the director surmised she was not Catholic. (Guests to Sue's divorce party assumed it was a manifestation of her odd sense of humor.) [7,063]



*Above:* Javant in the Drawing Room selling copies of Nosukumo publications *Thalassa thalassa* and *Did you see him cry* at a launch, 19 February 1984.

*Photo:* Sue Rachmann.

**April, 1985.** Athol Shmith photographs Maurice Hambur in Labassa's courtyard, right in the spot where Johnny's kitchen used to be (see entry for July, 1984). Shmith would be about seventy, bald, fine white hair at the sides, a dent about the size of a marble in the cranium above the forehead, false teeth, small but laughing eyes, delicate hands, deliberate gait. He was wearing a blue serge suit with a horizontally striped red and blue tie. [6,984 & 7,144]

**May 20, 1985.** The elaborate setting [of Labassa] does not overwhelm me. It is nourishing in its splendor, bohemianism and history. The gold-leaf wallpapers, brocades, flowing staircase, crystalline and smaragdine stained glass, parquet, colonnades, reliefs, marble and statuettes exist yes to impress guests and visitors, not inhabitants. The richness one enters when one opens the front door with his own key (for years, one gained entry by pushing ajar a side window of stained glass and reaching in to unlatch the door from within); I found this unsatisfactory and lobbied the National Trust, who own the mansion, to provide each tenant with a [front-door] key).

One day Labassa will become a decorative arts museum. Mannequins of faceless personages wearing clothes never worn here, in stagy attitudes never staged here. Our own history [that of the tenants] will be effaced in favor of its early illustrious history of grand balls and salons and dinner parties. [7,259-7,261]

## Best-known spinster



**Above:** Eva Robertson, circa 1888.  
**Photo:** Neil Robertson.



**Above:** Eva Robertson (left) on holiday in Colombo with  
"Jo" Hammans (nee Wagner) in 1900. **Photo:** Wagner family album.

Eva Robertson, eldest daughter of Alexander Robertson and Hannah Goldsbrough Parker never married. Despite her father's efforts to match her with a British aristocrat, Eva became one of Melbourne's "best-known spinsters" and a "well-assured one" at that<sup>1</sup>.

While spinsters were often pitied, Miss Eva Robertson maintained her position among Melbourne's elite for nearly 60 years. The money she inherited from her father's estate following his death in 1896 made her a lady of independent means. Of far greater value perhaps was her wealth of social connections and style.

The Robertsons were prominent members of an elite that included the Armytages (Como) Chirnsides (Werribee Park), Clarkes (Rupertswood and Cliveden) and Sargoods (Rippon Lea). All these families knew each other through regular attendances at governors' levees, society balls and the Caulfield races.

Their children often attended the same schools. Before going to finishing school in Dresden, Eva was a pupil at the exclusive Oberwyl Girls' School in St Kilda where her classmates included the daughters of the Chirnside, Clarke and Sargood families. These elite families often developed close and enduring friendships.

They invited each other to holiday at their various properties, to attend private tennis parties and family weddings. Eva was a bridesmaid at several celebrity weddings including the marriage of Bertram Armytage in 1895 and Eveline Calvert (a Chirnside descendant) in 1900.

Mr Robertson's ambition that all three of his daughters 'marry up' failed. Emily wed Harry Bagot, a bicycle salesman and champion cyclist in 1887. Nina married Gisborne grazier Vereker Hamilton in 1898. However, the match-making opportunities Mr Robertson devised for his girls did provide Eva with an entrée to the international elite.

Mr Robertson and his partner John Wagner purchased Perricoota Station near Moama in NSW to breed horses for their coachline business. They also used the property to entertain royalty such as the Duke of Edinburgh, Princes Philip and Augustus of Saxe Coburg Gotha and the Duke of Genoa. In 1890 Mr Robertson hosted a spectacular coming-out party for Eva and Nina at Lord Aberdeen's mansion in Grosvenor Square, London. This party, attended by a who's who list of aristocrats was reported as being "by far the most magnificent and luxurious that London had seen for several seasons"<sup>2</sup>.

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## Forthcoming Open Days: 10.30am – 4.00pm

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

## 2018

November 18

December 9

(Christmas opening with  
carols and seasonal treats)

## 2019

January 20

February 17 (Melbourne International  
Millinery Competition display)

March 17

*Best-known spinster (cont.)*

Eva would never lack invitations to the best parties in Melbourne, London or on the continent. She was also among the best dressed at any gathering. As a young woman she favoured gowns in soft pastel colours made from duchesse satin, tulle and chiffon. In her middle years she was singled out by social columnists as “smart” and “chic”<sup>3</sup>.

After Mr Robertson’s death Eva and Nina left Ontario for Perricoota. Eva eventually moved into The Grand Hotel (now the Windsor) and later Dennistoun, a guest house in South Yarra where she had a suite of rooms. Eva rarely entertained at home preferring to host dinners for her friends at the Alexandra Club for women, The Grand or the Oriental Hotel, the latter being demolished in the 1970s to make room for Collins Place.

Josephine and Lottie Wagner were among Eva’s closest friends and she regularly travelled with the “Wagner clan” to England, Europe and Ceylon.

Miss Eva Robertson died in 1945 aged 75 years.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1913, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bulletin*, “Society”, 26 July 1890, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Critic*, 13 April 1901, p. 28.



*Above:* Nina (left), Eva Robertson (right) and servant (foreground).

*Watercolor:* Wagner family scrapbook.



*Above:* Eva Robertson as the ‘Queen of Sheba’ at a Vice Regal fancy dress ball in 1897.

*Photo:* Wagner family album.

**The final line up**

Michael Gleeson has identified his grandmother Maie Brown in this group photo published in *Labassa Lives*, Vol. 6, No.2. All key figures have now been identified as (left to right ): Emily Brearley (Caretaker); William O’Callaghan (Owner of Labassa); Lydia Buchanan; Maie Brown; Violet Miller; Isabella (Dot) Ede; Annie Chadwick; Pat Brearley (grand daughter of Emily Brearley) who is presenting flowers to Barbara Morris, Victorian Red Cross Divisional Commandant.