

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 8, Issue 3, 2020



## Rebel without a clue

By Randall Bouchier

Flat 7 1969–70

There's a lyric from Tom Petty's 1991 *Into the Great Wide Open* album that pretty much encapsulates my life during my time at Labassa in 1969 to around 1970. Those were heady days for an impressionable boy from the bush and they culminated in events which changed the direction of the rest of my life.

*Into the great wide open  
Under them skies of blue  
Out in the great wide open  
A rebel without a clue*

I'd moved to Melbourne in 1967 to begin an arts degree at Monash and was thrust into an avalanche of attractions and new possibilities. Long afternoons at the Notting Hill pub, hearing a live orchestra for the first time, discovering the allure of Melbourne rock-culture, relational freedoms – and all of this in the setting of a University seen by many as a 'hot-bed' of left-wing student radicalism.

By 1969 when I moved to Labassa, I was playing with The Chocolate – managed by David Flint who owned the Thumpin' Tum discotheque in Little La Trobe Street.

I recall that the first gig I played with the band was three hours at the 'Tum. Herman and Rudolph Marcic, who played bass and drums in Chocolate were wonderfully inventive and for some months I used equipment that they'd modified. They'd replaced the traditional 'foot-pumping' in an old harmonium with a vacuum cleaner engine to fill the bellows and manufactured a 'Leslie' speaker system housed in a six-foot-high wooden box, complete with controlled-speed, rotating 12 inch speakers powered by an old washing machine engine.

I'd power up the equipment and the vacuum cleaner engine would roar into life and the 'Leslie' system would wobble around precariously. Eccentric! But effective. I still chuckle at the memory of a gig with the Masters Apprentices on Myer's rooftop during the school holidays and the challenges we had in moving these cumbersome objects through a very crowded Myer store.



**Above:** The Chocolate: Keith Matcham, Herman Marcic, Randall Bouchier (Labassa resident), Rudolph Marcic, Mick Diggles (squatting).

**Photo:** Randall Bouchier.

Lead singer Keith Matcham drove a distinctive gold-painted classic Chevrolet, which hauled an equipment-laden tandem trailer. Later, we acquired a roadie who drove a similar silver-coloured vehicle. It was a dramatic spectacle when Chocolate arrived at a venue. The experiences with the band were fascinating for a young country boy! We played at most of the leading Melbourne venues. At The Catcher in Flinders Lane, the management had constructed a cage on the stage to protect the musicians and their equipment from fights that broke out from time to time.

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*Rebel without a clue (cont.)*

*Left:* Portrait of Randall Bouchier by Antoinette Starkiewicz.

There were occasional interviews leading to articles in the weekly rock magazine *Go-Set*. And TV appearances – *Fred Bear's Breakfast A Go-Go*, and the Saturday morning *Uptight*. Music for TV was pre-recorded. Australian Blues musician Matt Taylor joined us in one session to add harmonica.

When lead-guitarist Greg 'Sleepy' Lawrie left Chocolate to eventually join Carson County, Mick Diggles replaced him. Not long after, Mick and I played with the short-lived band Clack before I joined the musically satisfying band Luntch.

Clack was the only band I recall rehearsing at Labassa. Luntch rehearsed in an old factory building in the CBD. There *were* periodic informal jam sessions at Labassa. Chain lived nearby, and I remember bass player (Barry Sullivan – Big Goose) and drummer (Barry Harvey – Little Goose) jamming in my flat. A young Michael Gudinski lived nearby. I remember a couple of us once helping him jumpstart his unreliable old car. At one time he visited the flat to listen to one of my compositions. Some afternoons I'd improvise on my keyboard for an hour or two and residents from other flats would come and listen for a while.

For a time the famous Labassa wine cellar was occupied by Boris – a mysterious figure who drove a classic 30s black Jaguar. Boris managed Luntch, and also attracted some attention from the Drug Squad. A few of us were enjoying a smoke in my room one evening – passing around a hollowed-out carrot used as a smoke cooling chillum. After we'd finished, the used carrot had been tossed into the yard. Suddenly, flashlights appeared, and Drug Squad detectives converged on the yard eventually discovering the carrot. What followed was like something out of Looney Tunes with a DS detective and Boris sharing 'war stories'.

Boris constructed a large wooden frame that raised my bed well above head height. Not only was there more room for people to gather but he also added to the attraction by painting the ceiling black and adorning it with small yellow stars! It was quite comical watching Boris emerge from the cellar in the mornings with long-hair and beard streaked with plaster dust that had become dislodged through the night from the cellar ceiling.

My girlfriend Antoinette Starkiewicz lived not too far away in Elwood and visited frequently, sometimes using the cellar as her studio. As a student at the Victorian College for the Arts she encouraged my musical endeavours and introduced me to galleries and to film. Some of my keyboard improvisation forms part of the soundtrack of her first film. Antoinette went on to an acclaimed career in animated film.

Life was busy! Life was exciting! Luntch was poised to accept a residency in a Sydney club. But things were about to dramatically change! One evening two friends decided to break into a Hawthorn chemist in search of drugs to feed their habit. "I'll come with you," I foolishly said! As they were casing the chemist, I watched the arrival of police-cars responding to a silent alarm. I spent a chilly night in an outside lock-up, before being transferred to the Melbourne Remand Centre the following day. A kindly detective accompanied me back to Labassa en route to the lockup. Casting his eye over my instruments, books and flat he said: "Son, you don't need all this" – clearly inferring – "you can do better." Reflective hours in the cold lockup, and the dingy remand centre, helped trigger life-long change. Antoinette and her family kindly organised bail and legal representation for my subsequent hearing. Trevor Jones, Chair of the Monash Music Department generously testified at my trial and I escaped conviction.

Not long afterwards, I left Labassa and Luntch. As I embraced what I recognised as a Christian calling, life took on a new direction which has endured and provided a deeply satisfying, purposeful, meaningful, and sustained world view. My only regret has been the memory of my immature and hurtful severing of some relationships at the time, for which I offer heartfelt apology. My wife Mary and I were married in 1974. We have three wonderful now-adult children, Sally, Kate and Paddy. I trained as a teacher and spent over 30 rewarding years teaching piano to hundreds of students. And in 2001 I was ordained into the Ministry of Jesus Christ – a deeply fulfilling calling which actively continues to this day.

## Classical interludes



**Left:**

A recent photo of Graham Jacups.

**Photo:**

Graham Jacups.

**By Graham Jacups**

### Periodic resident 1968-69

Labassa was my Melbourne 'home' twice a year for the ballet and opera seasons. I was a top first violinist with the Elizabethan Theatre Trust Orchestra, which toured Australia eight months of the year. When you're on tour to go to Melbourne was so refreshing. Labassa was welcoming too. You drove down the street and entered a different world. My generous hosts were Janette and Keith Keen in Flat 2 (music-room flat). My bed was in a through room off their kitchen and bath rooms, which is now known as the smoking lounge.

Labassa was a musical house. Bill Edeson, who had a circle of friends following orchestral careers, lived upstairs along with violinist Alan Bonds and flautist Susie Powell who were both with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. For one of Janette's birthdays, Alan and I serenaded her in bed while Keith delivered breakfast – all three of us were dressed in tuxedos.

My times at 'home' were often during the morning or days of a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. I would practice the violin during the day and leave for town in the afternoon to play shows on Wednesdays and Saturdays at The Princess or Her Majesty's theatre.

Labassa was always alive; there was always somebody around, including Judith Cordingley and

David Innes. Artists Jake and Penny, who lived upstairs, made and sold art things. One was a double candle Jake had made using a mould of Penny's breasts when she was pregnant. You'd see Jake and Penny tearing around on their large motor bike.

I always felt accepted at Labassa. Everyone was pleased to see each other. There was an amazing subcultural understanding and great respect for others. My girlfriend Justine Bradley used to come over for weekends and we had lots of late Saturday night dinners when I got home around 11.30pm.

The music room, which I called the 'theatre room', had these wonderful ornate high ceilings. We put on some brilliant concerts on the small stage in that room: cabaret and shows with Susie on flute, Alan and I on violin. These concerts were mostly spontaneous; as soon as word got around other residents would just arrive. There was dancing and food on the table. I especially remember the room being lit by candles. Some nights there were 20 candles on the table. One night I played Bach's *Double Violin Concerto* with Alan Bonds. There were a lot of guffaws and laughing during the performance because it's a double violin concerto with an orchestra and we were covering all the other bits.

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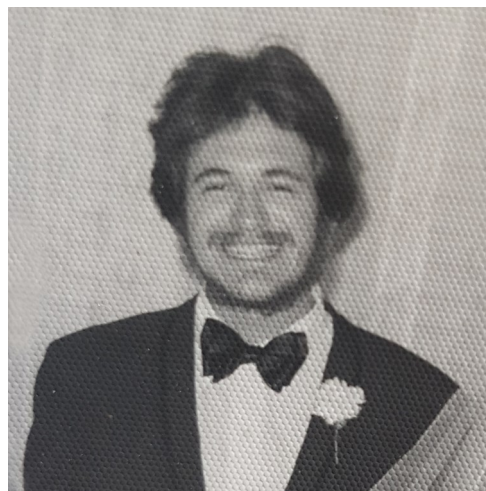


## Classical interludes (cont.)

I brought close friend [the late] Richard Divall to Labassa when I was down in Melbourne to play for a St Cecilia's Day concert in the National Gallery under the Leonard French ceiling. Richard was a conductor with Young Opera in Sydney at the time. I led his small ensemble for Young Opera when I was in Sydney. Richard was later encouraged by soprano Dame Joan Hammond to accept the position of inaugural Music Director of the Victorian State Opera.

Following the St Cecilia's Day concert put on by the Victorian State Opera on Saturday 25 November 1972, Richard, Dame Joan, her friend Lolita and I repaired to a party I had organised at Labassa. Richard played piano and I violin. From memory, we may have played *Ode to St Cecilia*, Handel, and French pieces of Rameau and/or Lully. We performed in the music room as well as on the ground floor in front of the grand stairs. There was an incredible elegance about Labassa that made such performances special.

The house had its own persona, not quite anthropomorphic but it inveigled you, it visited you.



**Left:**  
Graham Jacups  
c.1969.

**Photo:**  
Graham Jacups.

The main entrance and the staircases still take my breath away. And, I've played in a huge number of places in cities such as Vienna and London. Labassa's also intimate, not frighteningly gorgeous. It doesn't overpower you. I visited Labassa long after everyone I had known had moved on. I'd drive into Manor Grove and sit in the car and just look.

## Vale Peter Watson

Peter Watson, son of resident Malcolm Watson and grandson of owner John Boyd Watson II passed away on 4 September, 2020. Peter's grandfather bought the mansion in 1904 and changed its name from Ontario to Labassa.

Peter had a passion for Labassa's history and generously supported the Friends of Labassa and its fundraising activities for nearly forty years. Over the decades he donated invaluable photographs, letters, documents and artefacts. Shortly before his death he donated several significant pieces of Watson furniture and memorabilia.

Peter was a major source of stories about the Watsons and their life at the mansion. His father, Malcolm, proposed to his mother, Cora, on Labassa's staircase. Many of Peter's stories were related to him by his grandmother Flora Kate Watson who lived with Peter and his family until her death in 1931.

Peter's stories enabled the Trust to confirm the provenance of the statuette currently standing in one of the main stairwell niches. There were originally two statuettes both of which departed with the Watsons in late 1919. One, of a classical female figure holding a torch, was located at a liquidation sale in 1993 when Fanny's restaurant in Melbourne, closed.



**Left:**  
Peter Watson,  
2020.

**Photo:**  
Pam Trenfield.

Peter confirmed its provenance as he recognised a large dent in its arm caused, when as a boy, he knocked the statuette over. The National Trust purchased the statuette at auction for \$3500.

The fate of the second statuette remains a mystery. According to Peter, it was packed into a van with other Watson furnishings and sent on its way to Katie Hinemoa Watson's new home in Carnarvon, Western Australia. The consignment left Melbourne but the van and its precious contents were never seen again.

## Private matters: Mr Robertson

### Alexander William Robertson

#### Resident owner

1883–96

The obituaries for Alexander William Robertson focus on his public life: his success as a partner in the renowned Cobb & Co Coachlines, chairmanship of Goldsbrough Mort and as a major shareholder in the Mount Morgan Goldmine. Some note that he was a shrewd, genial and popular man who never made an enemy. None mention his dry, provocative sense of humour, private generosity and friendships with royalty. Several personal tragedies are also overlooked.

Although widely respected as a sophisticated gentleman, Robertson began his working life as a lowly logger on the Ottawa River in Canada. As his wealth grew he adopted the mantle of a cultured European gentleman. He collected fine art and art furnishings, which he personally selected from 'all the art depots of repute' on his regular visits to England and the Continent. He also cultivated the company of royals and aristocrats, in part, to improve the prospects of his three daughters marrying into their ranks. America's 'dollar princesses' had led the way by bringing much needed cash to an impoverished British aristocracy in exchange for a title. Lucy Beckett, one such American heiress, together with her aristocrat husband Ernest, presented Robertson's daughters Eva and Nina at Queen Victoria's court in May 1890.

Robertson also engaged Edward Hughes, an artist popular with the peerage, to paint a portrait of his daughters. This portrait was not well reviewed when shown at the 1893 Anglo-Australian Fine Arts Exhibition with one reviewer commenting that it was 'no work of art'. It appeared to have been painted from photographs and its details were 'false to nature.' There may be some truth to this as Hughes signed and dated the painting 1891 after the Robertsons had returned to Australia.

The sumptuous party Robertson held in London on 11 June 1890 for Eva and Nina's coming out was attended by over 40 members of the peerage along with the Duke of Edinburgh and his Highness Maharaja Duleep Singh, last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire.



*Above:* An early photo of Mr Robertson. Date unknown. *Photo:* Robertson family.



*Above:* Painting of Nina and Eva Robertson by Edward Hughes, 1891. *Image:* Neil Robertson.

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## Private matters: Mr Robertson (cont.)



**Left:** Perricoota Station, near Moama, New South Wales where Mr Robertson hosted British and European royalty.

Robertson and his partner, John Wagner, purchased Perricoota to breed horses for their Cobb & Co. Coachlines.

**Photo:** Neil Robertson.

Several guests knew Robertson well as he had hosted them at Perricoota Station near Moama, New South Wales. European royal visitors to Perricoota included Prince August of Saxe Coburg Gotha (first cousin of Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert) and August's son, Prince Philipp.

Ontario was to be Robertson's own 'palace', a reflection of his rank and refined European taste. The Renaissance cartouche above the mansion's south facing front bay window even has a fake family crest, the inclusion of Scottish thistles, likely an allusion to Robertson's own heritage.

Although part of an elite, Robertson was far from being elitist. He is believed to have paid Alfred Deakin's school fees at the Church of England Grammar School, Melbourne. Deakin's father, William, was bookkeeper for Cobb & Co. and Robertson apparently saw promise in young Alfred, a future founder of the Federation Movement and Australia's second prime minister.

Among Robertson's personal tragedies were the premature deaths of his two wives. His first wife Emily died aged 24, from 'debility' in 1865 two months after giving birth to their only child. His second wife Hannah, died aged 32, from heart disease in 1882 while Robertson was in Queensland. Hannah had been up all night nursing her youngest son, Alexander, who had scarlet fever. Hannah was found dead by a servant at 5 am. Robertson's eldest daughter Emmie, like her mother Emily, died shortly after giving birth in 1895.

The fourth, and rarely mentioned loss, was the suicide of his brother Colin. Colin managed Cobb & Co. Coachlines in the Goulburn district, New South Wales. A fall from a coach resulted in a brain injury from which he never recovered. Although he retired from the business to recuperate, his condition deteriorated and he was removed to Cook's River Asylum where he died in 1876.

These tragedies affected Robertson deeply. Shortly after the death of his second wife, Robertson suffered an unspecified illness, serious enough for rumours of his own death to be circulating in September 1882. In June the following year, newspapers reported that he was 'much altered in appearance and does not resemble the gentleman he was when residing in Castlemaine several years ago, when he abounded with gaiety and high spirits.'

The physical energy and nerve that had distinguished Robertson a few years earlier was gone. He had been renowned for his 'quick eye and indomitable courage' in wrangling deer and livestock and in 1878, had personally driven visiting members of the English cricket team from Sandridge (Port Melbourne) to the Melbourne Town Hall in a four-in-hand<sup>1</sup>.

In May 1892 Robertson had a life-changing accident at the Hotel Australia in Sydney. As he entered the lift from the dining room, the lift boy started the mechanism while Robertson had only one foot in the carriage.

<sup>1</sup> Four horses driven by one person.

*Private matters: Mr Robertson (cont.)*

**Left:** Alexander Robertson suffered a series of health setbacks from 1882 until his death in 1896.

**Image:** Robertson family.

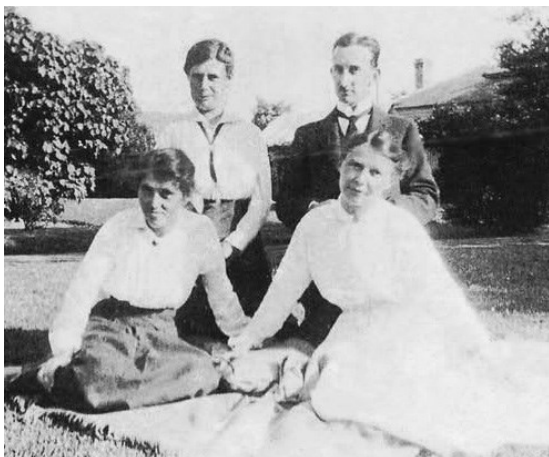
Realising he was in danger of being crushed to death, he threw himself out of the lift but fell and broke his collar bone and fractured several ribs. The next day he developed pneumonia. Robertson initially made light of his injuries but his general health went into decline. During the last two years of his life he was very ill and three months before his death was confined to Ontario. He died aged 65, on 16 July 1896, his state of mind reflected in the numerous minor changes he made to his will and the inclusion of no less than six codicils.

Robertson's personal papers reveal little of the man: he was fond of his Canadian family and had a strong affinity with Scotland, his parents' homeland. However, accounts of his robust sense of humour point to a man who was witty, politically astute and confident in dealing with people of any status.

In March 1875, Sale, Victoria, hosted a large public celebration for the turning of the sod for the Gippsland Railway. The ministers for Railways and Mines made speeches and a toast was given to Cobb & Co. for its role in opening up Gippsland. Robertson who knew the railway meant the death knell of the coachline business gave an artful, and by all accounts, humorous reply:

"Gippsland," he [Robertson] said, "had suffered dreadfully from bad roads. On one occasion the drivers on the Gippsland Road said they could not get through in twenty-four hours. He said that they must! The drivers asked how they could do it. He said kill someone. Then the question was whom they should kill. He left them to their choice, but recommended that they should, if possible, kill a Minister of the Crown, or the Mayor of Sale or Melbourne. If they could not do that, then let them upset two members of Parliament but be sure that both were supporters of the Ministry not Oppositionists otherwise they would never have the roads mended. As the nearest approach to the instructions issued, he (the driver), once upset an eminent judge into the 'Gluepot'<sup>1</sup> head first. He pulled the judge out again, as he had not the heart to kill such a man. They could easily imagine what the drivers suffered in not being able to kill a Minister."

<sup>1</sup> A 'Glue pot' was a road that was made impassable due to the sticky mud that sucked at the feet of the horses.



## Who were the Pettigrews?

Little is known about Ron and Kit Pettigrew who joined the Labassa household around 1922. They were one of many couples who moved home multiple times and have proven difficult to research. We know much more about Kit's father, John Larard, a well-known jeweller and Ron's brother, Norman, who is buried at Villiers Bretonneaux. Ron was a warehouse manager for most of his life, Kit a homemaker. If you know anything more about this family please contact *Labassa Lives*.

**Left:** Back row: Kit and Ron Pettigrew. Front row: Edna Larard (Kit's half-sister) and Jeannie Larard (Kit's sister). **Photo:** Ancestry.com.



## Volume 8, Issue 3, 2020

## Forthcoming Open Days and events

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.

Please forward to:

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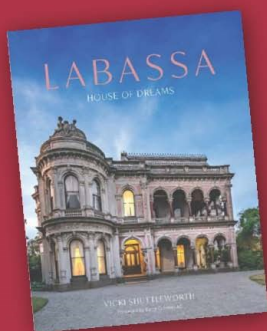
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Due to the coronavirus pandemic, all open days and events are cancelled until further notice.

# Order form

## Labassa: House of Dreams



### LABASSA: HOUSE OF DREAMS

A new, detailed history of Labassa will be available to purchase from the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) online shop. The book traces Labassa's multiple metamorphoses from eight-room villa to palatial mansion, from a community of families to an enclave for young artists. The mansion's eleventh-hour rescue by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) is told for the first time. This lavishly designed book includes a foreword by Barry Owen Jones AC, endnotes, index and over 100 photos, many specially commissioned for the book.

ISBN: 9781743797006

Format: Hardback

Pages: 192 pages

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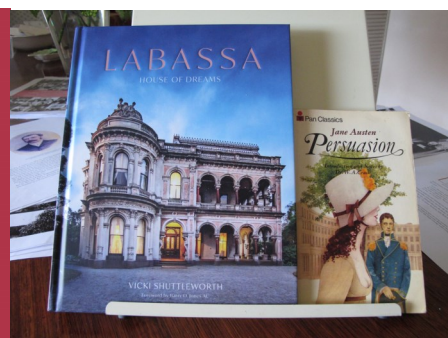
Weight: 940 grams

RRP: \$39.95

Publisher: Hardie Grant Books

Published: October 2020

Labassa: House of dreams is a limited-edition publication. You can purchase the book now for \$39.95 plus \$15 postage using the order form below or by visiting our online shop. The book will be distributed from November 2020.



Above: Cover showing size comparative to a paperback.

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Many of Australia's grand nineteenth-century mansions have been lost, most to the wrecker's pick, others to unsympathetic renovation. By contrast, Labassa mansion has not only survived; it has done so with its opulent 1890s décor largely intact.

This book traces the transformation of one of Marvellous Melbourne's most spectacular mansions from its origin as a modest villa to its twentieth-century nadir as a warren of run-down flats. Told here for the first time is the story of how, in 1980, the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) made an eleventh-hour, high-stakes decision to rescue Labassa.

The 700-plus people who once called Labassa home have included millionaires, movie stars, war heroes and refugees. In the 1960s a generation of artists re-discovered the mansion's breathtaking beauty and turned it into a bohemian enclave. The timely role played by many of these residents in the mansion's miraculous survival is revealed through their personal stories so vividly featured in this lavishly designed publication. (*Backcover blurb*)