

Labassa *lives*

Volume 9, Issue 2, 2021

A sanctum on the road



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Left: After leaving Labassa, John Laurie headed to England in pursuit of his dream of being a famous director. **Photo:** John Laurie.

By John Laurie

Walking down the corridor at school one day in my usual state of self-absorbed shyness, a teacher (Peter Oyston) leapt out from a classroom and dragged me inside, saying "You're in the school play." The idea appalled me, but it changed my life. My horizons went from my feet to the sky and it led me to Labassa. After that I went overseas, made some short films and a feature (Stroker) and worked for Crawford Productions on various soaps. I taught media at Philip Institute for ten years, then worked at Emergency Management Australia in communications development. I'm now back to my first love – painting and music. Currently I'm making world electronica under the name 'Billy Swagg' and painting landscapes.

Fifty-six years ago, through 1964 and into '65, I lived in Flat 6 (upstairs balcony flat). I was 18, with great expectations. Henry Bolte was Premier. The Vietnam War was just ramping up and Robert Menzies was promising conscription to keep our American friends happy. It was still pounds shillings and pence. The pubs closed at 6pm and Melbourne won the Grand Final.

I shared the flat with John Romeril and Peter Barrett, two blokes my age. We all wanted to be writers, of one sort or another, and shared a mordant, somewhat cynical view of the world. We came out of school bonded in opposition to the 'sporting jocks' by our self-described status as 'intellectuals', proud to devour theatre, literature, art and music. Arguments were common.

Romeril knew a friend who said LJ Hooker was renting cheap flats at Labassa. We'd been looking around so came to visit. When we saw it in its faded grandeur, we thought it'd be a great place to live so Romeril went to the agent and signed up.

We weren't big on cooking so the basic kitchen didn't worry us nor the 19th century bathroom with ornate tiles, ancient bath and a gas water heater known as a 'geyser' (say that word and I can still smell it). It would occasionally start up with a loud bang, shaking plaster flakes off the wall, or the pilot light would go out, requiring a hazardous relight with matches.

But when winter came was it cold. High ceilings and no heating at all. We'd huddle round our 'Valor Junior' kerosene heater in our army surplus overcoats hugging our hot tea. Coffee was not a thing back then.

Instant coffee could be bought but it was as horrible then as it is now. Horlicks, a sort of hot watery gravy, was popular along with chicory (a coffee substitute). Much of Australia was still living the culture of British deprivation from World War 2. But Carlton was starting to get popular with pasta, pizzas, coffee and wine and there were Jewish delicatessens around Labassa with lots of interesting foods.

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A sanctum on the road (cont.)

It was a pretty carefree existence. We all had jobs, paid the cheap rent – bare boards and lack of heating was expected for struggling artists, wannabe writers, poets and film-makers.

The faded beauty of the house made up for that with the pigeons cooing on the balcony in the mornings. We furnished the place with cheap furniture from the auction rooms in Chapel Street – out-of-fashion Victorian solid wood was going for a song then, as everyone wanted the modern laminex, chrome-plated steel and plywood.

The balcony in summer was a great place to relax – we had old rococo armchairs we'd bought at the Chapel Street auctions and we'd drag them through the window onto the tiles.

Peter loved a Noel Coward style dressing gown and smoked joints in cigarette holders, while Romeril was more laconic and down to earth. We'd read each other our work in progress and talk about the folly of war.

Existentialism was the dominant philosophy of the day – a search for meaning in a world left shell-shocked and fatalist by two world wars and the threat of a third. The zeitgeist of the times was imminent nuclear war. *Eve of Destruction* was big on the charts, and if you were reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* you knew war wasn't the only problem. On the other hand, anyone could get a real job, house prices were about three years' average wages and if you wanted a car you just bought one and drove it away. No roadworthy, no insurance, no licence checks, no speed cameras, no seat belts and no surveillance.

There were no computers, internet, mobile phones or even many landlines. No video, no cheap air travel and TV was only eight years old. The written word was much more significant, and for us literature and language were central to what we wanted to achieve. We saw ourselves as part of a timeless continuity from Chaucer through Shakespeare to Hemingway and beyond, unaware of the coming digital revolution that would change it all forever.

William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett were our literary heroes at the time along with Jack Kerouac, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Joseph Conrad.

Labassa was an inspiring place to write with its romantic ambience and we were often to be heard clicking away on our typewriters, learning the craft of poetry and storytelling. Romeril was writing 'the great Australian novel'.



Left: John Laurie, 1963, taken beside the Hawkesbury River, NSW.

Photo: John Laurie.

We all wanted Hemingway's portable Remington, but I had an old 1940s Royal desk model. Romeril went off to the auctions one day hoping for a Remington portable and came back with a Burroughs mechanical calculating machine from the '40s that he'd bought for a song. "Why?" was my question. It looked impressive but no one ever used it.

I was more into poetry than my flatmates. W.B. Yeats and Dylan Thomas were favourites though I liked Wordsworth and Thomas Gray. I had a recording of *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, which I used to annoy them by playing, along with Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme* by Thomas Tallis. Romeril and Barrett sneered at the English poets. The Americans were for them – Snyder, Ginsberg and Rexroth. But they were an equal inspiration for my writing visions being a balance of the pastorate against the prevailing dystopia of Vietnam and existentialism.

For movies I preferred the esoteric and loved Alan Resnais' *Last year at Marienbad*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* while Romeril liked John Ford, Hitchcock and Westerns. We all loved Jacques Tati.

We had the same arguments about *Gone with the Wind* that they've been having recently. Romeril took the 'woke' view while I just loved the story, having read the book first.

Labassa was in transition at the time, growing into a hotbed of art, music and literature. As the older tenants moved out, the cheap rent and inspirational setting made it an attractive proposition for young people.

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A sanctum on the road (cont.)

We had lots of visitors from across the river and one day Adrian Rawlins, whose statue stands in Brunswick Street Fitzroy, came down and stood in the right hand empty plinth on the staircase and recited the whole of that very long poem *Howl* by Alan Ginsberg, at the top of his voice, which led to complaints to LJ Hooker from some other tenants.

This was before hippies. People called us beatniks. The word 'hippy' was a media invention. Later we'd be part of the 'counter-culture'. I never got called a hippy till I was in North Queensland in 1972.

We'd play cards and board games but a lot of time was spent discussing literature, poetry and critiquing each others' work. We had no TV and no radio, but we had a record player and lay around listening to The Rolling Stones etc. and drinking cheap red wine. And reading a lot. In those days the written word was king. The pubs closed at 6 o'clock but there was a lane behind Chapel Street with an old garage with a sort of wooden window. You could get down there late at night and bang on the window with the code and someone would sell you plonk.

We went to quite a few parties at Peter Homewood's flat downstairs. Peter had it decorated full rococo with velvet drapes, peacock feathers, ornate credenzas, and chaise longues, furnished from the props stores of Melbourne theatre companies where he worked. Melbourne's theatre royalty were often in attendance and there were impromptu performances and charades. I remember a string quartet on one occasion.

I smoked my first joint with blues guitarist John Duffy in Labassa's tower, looking out over Caulfield to the bay.



Left: John Laurie regaled visitors with stories of his days at Labassa at the May 2021 open day.

Photo: Jon Boughton.

I was making my first movie after hours at the ABC, where I was a trainee film editor. When I finished my film I left the ABC. I did Romeril's job delivering meat for Redlich's butchers while he was away in New Zealand, then I got a job as a proof reader for Markby's Printing in South Melbourne. Jobs were so easy to get in those days. I left that and Labassa in 1965 to go overseas, by ship as we all did then.

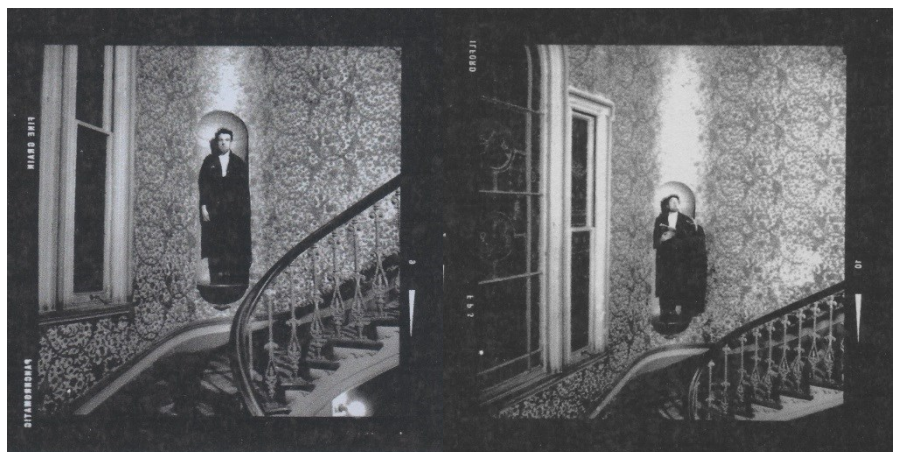
I'd been saving up to head off to England to chase a career as a famous director, but when I got there was swept up in Swinging London and its delights and any ideas of any career at all went out the window with the dope and the R&B. I'd head on down to the Flamingo Club in Soho and catch Eric Clapton, John Mayall, Roy C, Otis Redding, the Yardbirds, the Byrds, and go boating with my girlfriend in Regents Park.

I've lived in many places across the world since leaving home at 16, but there was always something special about Labassa. Possibly why it's still in my life and I'm writing this.

Adrian's Howl

In the above article John Laurie tells the story of the night Adrian Rawlins stood in the right hand niche on Labassa's staircase and recited Alan Ginsberg's poem *Howl* at the top of his voice.

These images taken from a photocopy of Nigel Buesst's proof sheet may be from that very evening.



Tate & Fredrikson in the cellar

Two of Australia's leading costume and set designers were among the many artists who rented Labassa's cellar as a studio. Jennie Tate and Kristian Fredrikson, both deceased, were working at the Melbourne Theatre Company at the time.

They never lived at the mansion so stories of their interactions with the building or its inhabitants are rare. Jennie's sister, Susan, says the designers shared the cellar as a studio space in the early 1970s. She has a happy memory of a laughter and fun-filled day spent at Labassa.

Jennie Tate (1947 – 2007)



Left: Jennie Tate at the Gosford Regional Gallery, 2007.

Photo: Matchbox Projects.

Jennie is especially remembered for modelling her costumes around an understanding of the characters.

A graduate of Monash and La Trobe universities, Jennie trained in set and costume design at the Melbourne Theatre Company. While based in Melbourne, she also designed for the Victoria State Opera, St Martin's Youth Theatre and Playbox.

Her 35-year plus career encompassed opera, theatre, film and television. She designed for Opera Australia and most of the major theatre companies in Australia. In later years, Jennie taught design at the National Institute of Dramatic Art.



Left: Jennie Tate's design for the characters Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*.

Photo: Jennie Tate Collection, Performing Arts Museum, Melbourne.

Kristian Fredrikson (1940 – 2005)



Left: Kristian Fredrikson.

Photo: The Australian Ballet.

Kristian was known for his sumptuous costumes, such as those he created for Dame Joan Sutherland's *Lucrezia Borgia* in 1977. His stock horse riders' costumes for the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics opening ceremony won him international exposure.

Kristian designed for the Wellington Opera Company and the Royal New Zealand Ballet before moving to Australia and joining the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1966 as a resident designer. Like Jennie Tate he worked as a stage and costume designer across multiple fields. From 1975 onwards, he regularly collaborated with Graeme Murphy on productions such as *Body of Work* for the Sydney Dance Company and *Tivoli*, a co-production with the Australian Ballet.

People who knew Kristian described him as a social hermit. He is said to have identified with being a 'Goth' long before the Goth subculture movement became popular in the 1980s. Could it be that Kristian was one of Labassa's mysterious and unidentified 'Goths in the cellar'?



Left: Kristian Fredrikson's design for Dame Joan Sutherland as Desdemona in *Otello*.

Photo: Dame Joan Sutherland Collection, Performing Arts Museum, Melbourne.

The letters of John Boyd Watson



Above: John Boyd Watson II, circa 1905.
Photo: Peter Watson.

Following the death of Alexander Robertson in 1896, the mansion was leased for the next eight years. Winding up Robertson's extensive estate was complex and it was only when his business partner John Wagner died in 1901 that the executors for Robertson, Wagner and Co. made a concerted effort to sell their properties.

By the time the Watsons purchased Labassa in May 1904 the property was starting to look tired and Horace Rudd, acting for Robertson, Wagner and Co. agreed to carry out some necessary repairs and refurbishments.

Watson paid for some of the upgrades himself such as asphaltting the gravel pathways.

This small selection of letters from John Boyd Watson II's letterbook highlights some of the changes made to Labassa around this time. A copy of the letterbook is held by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

Removing the Billiard room?

June 4, 1904

Mr W. P. Elsdon¹
441 Collins Street
Melbourne

Dear Elsdon, The men are to start on Monday to do up 'Ontario', the wet weather prevented them starting before. Mrs Watson and I are both to leave for Sydney on Wednesday 8th and will be over there till about the 24th of this month. On my return from Sydney will then see to removing the Billiard room and other buildings².

Repapering?

Mr H. Rudd³
St James Buildings
William Street
City

Mrs Watson says please not to have anything done to her bedroom, dressing room and the room I am going to have for an office, as we will have these rooms papered later on to match the carpets.

Now known as Labassa

September 17, 1904

Mr Rudd

Dear Sir, I enclose a copy of a letter received by me from the Underwriters' Association of Victoria in regard to the electric light connection at Ontario – now known as Labassa. From a perusal of the letter you will see that the connections are not in order, and I shall be glad if you will at once have them put in order and to the specifications of the work to be done so that there may be no undue delay in my moving into the premises.

¹ Architect and surveyor.

² This billiard room is likely to have been one of many out-buildings that have not been documented. The outbuildings included 'a very handsome ballroom' erected as part of the 1890 redevelopment of Ontario, *The Australasian*, 13 September 1890, p. 38.

³ Horace Rudd, acting for the Robertson estate.

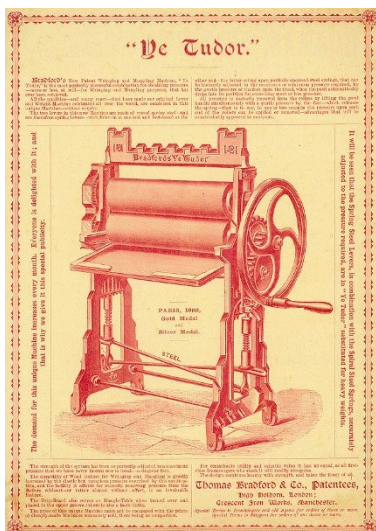
The letters of John Boyd Watson II (cont.)

Wiring condemned

My dear Mr Lloyd

We have been exceedingly busy at our new house and removed into it on the 27th of October. The men will finish laying the carpets on the tower stairs by Friday and thank goodness they will be out of the house for good. We were to have taken possession of the house on the 10th of September but when we came to switch on the electric light our troubles commenced. The engineer for the Fire and Underwriters Association came to the house and condemned the whole wiring practically all over the house and besides will not allow us to use the electric light and gas combination fittings as we had to have the gas cut off, excepting in the kitchen and scullery. They had to do the rewiring and it was to take 3 weeks, and they have been here going on seven weeks and will be another week before all is completed. It will cost [illegible] estate from £140 to £160 as there is over 150 lights inside the house ...

Laundress growls



Left: An example of a mangle referred to by Mr Watson in his letter below.

March 23, 1905

Mr W. P. Elsdon
441 Collins St, Melbourne

Dear Sir

I have been going to write to you almost every day, and I keep forgetting about it. I suppose you are not aware that McLennan has never had the mangle repaired, and Mrs Watson's laundress growls every week about it not being in good order.

I wish you would see about it at once, and get McLennan to send for it.

Hoping you are well

Yours faithfully

J. B. Watson

Summer holidays

The Watson family often spent Christmas and New Year at San Remo or Cowes on Phillip Island. With only a limited number of stores available, Mr Watson sent for supplies on an almost daily basis. In 1903 he requested that all the following items arrive the next day on the 8am train from Melbourne. There was no rail service to San Remo or Phillip Island so Mr Watson's order was likely sent to Stony Point, and transferred to the Island on the steamer *Genesta*. His precisely annotated order included a curious assortment of items.

Order 19th December 1903

5 dozen bananas not too ripe.

Two pairs of patent leather ankle shoes, size 13. One pair of leather lace up shoes. Stitch them well across the toes.

An umbrella not to cost more than 23/- shillings as the one I had somebody took it away from the hotel on Saturday.

6 boxes of fresh Turkish figs @ 2/- per box, 5/- worth of toffee and 5/- worth of your best butter scotch.

2 pairs of stays for the baby girl (3 years). I think about size 2 will do her.

One chest of 100lbs of your very best tea.

Enamel doll's tea sets.

Pairs of long cotton stockings. They are for the children to wear when they run in and out of the water when on the beach.

1 case of your best champagne – large bottles.

1 case of sparkling burgundy, 1 case best sherry, 1 case best port and 4 doz of your best English Ale pint bottles.

The Stangs of Ontario Flats



Left: The Stang family moved many times during Dr Stang's medical career in regional Victoria. This photo, taken circa 1907, shows Dr Thomas Stang in the foreground with three of his daughters. Mrs Eleanor Bath Stang is standing on the porch. The identity of the boy on the right is unknown.

Photo: Ray Jelley.

Ontario's original brick stables, tennis pavilion and main conservatory were alienated from the mansion and sold on separate lots in 1919. The stables were briefly restored to the Labassa Estate between 1926 and 1934 when Labassa's then owner, Robert Hannon, bought the site and converted the building into three flats each with their own garage.

Tenancies for the Ontario Flats were managed by Labassa's caretaker Mrs Emily Brearley who ensured that only 'quality' tenants were accepted. After all, Robert and Emily Hannon themselves were also Ontario residents.

Dr Thomas Newbold Stang and his wife Eleanor Bath Stang lived at Ontario Flats around 1926-7. The Stangs were an eminent family and highly-educated. Dr Stang had migrated from Norway where his father was a Chief Justice. Thomas's brother August Stang was Norwegian consul for Western Australia. Thomas and Eleanor's daughter Eleanor Margrethe Stang became a doctor with the West Australian, Public Health Department.

Although Mrs Stang's role was often described as 'home duties' she was a prominent member of the Austral Salon in Melbourne which was established for women interested in fine arts. Her social engagements and overseas travels with members of the Salon were often reported in the newspapers.

Apart from running a general practice, Dr Stang served as a medical officer in the Royal Army Medical Corp (RAMC) with the rank of lieutenant during the First World War. The British Government paid for his passage to England.

In 1917 Stang had 3000 soldiers in his care: "My headquarters are in Bristol, but I have been several times out in the fighting line, and have had charge of convoys of wounded men going to England, and after these have been safely distributed to the various hospitals, have been sent back for more. Just lately I have been in charge of a camp of convalescent soldiers, who are being trained and hardened off to once more going over to France."

Left: Circa 1915. Dr Stang is seated at the back. *Front, left to right:* Mildred Jelley (Mrs Stang's niece), Shepley Edwin Jelley, and Mrs Stang holding Mildred Florence Jelley.

Photo: Ray Jelley.



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

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Correction

In the previous issue (Vol. 9, Issue 1), the colour interior photo of the hallway on page 7 was incorrectly dated as 1994.

The correct date is 1974.

Christmas in July – Sunday 18th July

Photo: Friends of Labassa.

Experience a mid-winter Christmas in Labassa's lavish surroundings. We're decking the hallways and setting the dining room table with all the style of a sumptuous 1890 banquet. Learn how to make your own decorations and vintage cards or take a guided tour of the house and exterior.

The tower and tearoom will be closed due to COVID safety protocols.

Opening hours: 10am – 4.30pm (last entry at 3.30pm)

Bookings: Timed ticketing applies and bookings through [eventbrite.com.au](https://www.eventbrite.com.au) are recommended.

Distant voices

Little is known about many former Labassa residents. They appear on electoral rolls, in government gazettes and directories but their 'story' is elusive. Any information on the following people would be very welcome. Please email vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au

Residents

1919	Eli Ashdown (gardener) Annie Ashdown (home duties)
1922	George W. Currie (builder)
1922	James Lachlan MacGregor, Mary MacGregor and daughter Vera Bredalbane MacGregor who was born at Labassa
1924	Rupert William Crosby (manager)
1924	Malvina Kate Swan (home duties)
1925	Cecil Thompson (agent)
1927-8	Michael Scobie Ross (agent) and Bertha Mary Ross (home duties)
1928	Thomas Harding
1929	Miss Louisa Bennett (home duties)
1930	John White
1932	Lilian Fenton (home duties)
1934	William Henry Allen (bootmaker), Ivy Lucy Allen (home duties)
1934-7	Maria Vera Nell (home duties) and son Frederick John Nell (known as 'John', clerk)
1946	Dora Piddock-Denne (home duties)
1962-3	Thomas Lacey with wife, and at least three children including two boys and a girl
1966 (circa)	Keith Jepson (student)
1967-8	Henk or Hans Jansen (student) and Paul Jansen (possibly his brother)

Ontario flats (when they were part of the Labassa Estate)

1926	Amos Walter Bowman (medical practitioner) and Isabella Janet Bowman (home duties)
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