



# MOUNT ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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## Julie Ryan: The Mayoress Poet

In July 2018 at the Mount Albert Library – named after Clarice Anderson, a former Mayoress – another former Mayoress, Julie Ryan, launched her book of poetry: *Last of the Halcyon Days*, published by Steele Roberts, Aotearoa. Almost 100 people gathered for the launch and 60 books were sold.

While many Mount Albert citizens remember their last mayoress and the wonderful work she did in this role, not so many will be aware of Julie Ryan the poet. In 2006 Julie went to “Writers in Winter” at the University of Auckland. There was only one workshop with space, and it was in poetry. Siobhan Harvey was the tutor and the workshop, every day for five days, proved to be great fun, indeed, “a great start”.

Julie had been thinking of a novel. She had already written her father’s biography. He was a beekeeper in the far North producing teatree honey that the honey marketing authority deemed too thick. He made a farthing a pound, but a brother, Malcolm, carried on the business into happier Manuka Honey days. It was his wife, Patricia that told Julie the story.

Julie grew up in the north and came to Auckland in 1954 to go to university, where she majored in English in the days when the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts was staffed by some renowned professors: Alan Curnow, John Reid, Sidney Musgrove, and the medieval scholar Annie Sheppard among them. Dr Sheppard terrified everyone and every Arts student studied Anglo Saxon with her. The long epic poem Beowulf she taught is remembered vividly by all. Julie’s daughter Lucy starred in Xena: Warrior Princess, a series in which Beowulf and the monster Grendel appeared. After the series ended, Julie



*Julie Ryan at her book launch*

purchased the suit they had used for Grendel to remind herself of Annie Sheppard’s lectures.

After completing her studies, Julie taught for one year at Mount Roskill Grammar School, before she married Frank Ryan (refer to MAHS Issue 40) and moved in 1960 to the Onehunga Homes house that they built in Preston Avenue, Mount Albert. They had a half-acre back section with 27 next-door neighbours. This was their home for 52 years. Julie describes it as a 3-bedroom shoebox – costing \$3,500 at 3.5%.

As the family grew, they “simply added another wing”. When husband Frank became mayor, the youngest of their then five children was five months old.

A young friend came and lived in for a while, to help when there were six children and, when the seventh was born, Julie’s next door neighbour sent her cleaning lady in to help. After a fortnight, Julie gave her strawberries in thanks and to say goodbye, but that cleaner actually continued working for the household for the next five years. The Senior Citizens’ Society also kept the

family in bowls of fruit for each baby. Julie “did not write any poetry in those years!”

She was busy with the Mayoresses’ Relief Committee, which gave out food parcels and furniture. Eileen Smith, Secretary of that committee, “took Julie in hand”, an induction she was grateful for. That took up 20 years until amalgamation, and meant that Julie had connections with all the support services in Mount Albert and Auckland City.

She was also a member of the Ferndale Club founded by Iris Rountree, the daughter of Mrs Dove of Dove’s Drapers. One of the Ferndale Club speakers she remembers vividly was Professor Beaglehole, who suggested that the Mount Albert Borough Council should build the mountain up to its original height with bales of rubbish.

There was the Women’s Institute and the Town’s Women’s Guild, the Plunket Society and Plunket Mothers that all wanted her patronage. In the spring she and Frank were kept very busy with the openings of Mount Albert’s seven bowling clubs and one croquet club. It was however something they both enjoyed. She recalls the networking and the wonderful homemade food for afternoon tea. Their kind friends from the bowling club have visited and brought such food since Frank died in 2017.

Julie lives close to family although some live overseas or in other parts of New Zealand. She is busy writing. The thriller she started when Frank was first ill was inspired by a visitor who reported that a friend “was going to Saint Petersburg to buy a glass-bottomed boat”. That story became “Swimming with Big Fish”. The hero ended up in Guantanamo Bay.

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Now she is writing about the journey home, via Syria: "Swimming with Crocodiles". The research for that has kept her busy for four years, and she went to Israel and Jordan to get a bit of the flavour. She found it "wonderful and a little bit strange".

*Last of the Halcyon Days* references many old memories of Julie's more than 50 years with Frank in Mount Albert:

*Our good lawn-mowing man has gone to London.  
Unchopped, the poorman oranges sprawl around,  
bare branches scrape and claw a watery sun, ....*

Also their travels both in New Zealand and abroad:

*The ferry accomplishes reverently  
the marriage of two islands.  
Picton sprawls back satisfied,  
children and revellers abound.*

Some New Zealand history, such as in *Lay it on thick*, a poem inspired by Anthony Stones' statue of Peter Fraser outside Old Government Buildings, Wellington:

*This is my first prime minister,  
pelting across the road  
between the government buildings.  
No time to put on a coat:  
division bells are sounding  
and he has a war to make,  
beating butter into guns.*

New Zealand flora and fauna feature. *Last of the halcyon days*, which gives the collection its name, describes waves the colour of kingfisher feathers:

*One tone brighter, they would combust  
like peat fires at Kaimaumu.  
Copper fumes brewing hot cumulus  
stream into a white plume overhead.*

Family close and extended:

*Before daybreak this morning  
he called from a London bar.  
He only wanted the name of a port  
"You know the one, it starts with 'T'.  
I want to settle some fights.  
It's the closest jumping-off place  
for the Poor Knights."*

The blurb on the back cover explains that an earlier draft of the collection won the 2014 International Writers' Workshop Kathleen Grattan prize for a sequence of poems.

Janet Charman, the Award Judge, said the poems jumped out at her as "intellectually chewy; fascinating; astutely and provocatively nutty; overall an entirely rewarding read."



Alice Wylie and Julie Ryan at the book launch.

*Last of the Halcyon Days* can be purchased for \$25 posted from the author, email [julieryan@xtra.co.nz](mailto:julieryan@xtra.co.nz).

## M.A.H.S Dates To Remember

### **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2019, 2pm, The Shaw Estate, Sandringham**

We will visit Shaw, McDonald, Collins, and Ethel Streets, and Leslie and Kenneth Avenues. We meet on the corner of Shaw Street and Sandringham Road just before 2pm for this walk led by Mary Inomata. We have a 25 walker limit, so *registration is essential*, [info@mtalberthistoricalsociety.org.nz](mailto:info@mtalberthistoricalsociety.org.nz) or 846 4509.

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2019, 2pm, Ferndale House**

Hugh Dickey will speak on *The Growth of New Zealand Towns*, the subject of his recently published book of the same name.

### **Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019, 2pm, The Clay House, 39 Lloyd Avenue**

Mid-Winter Christmas! MAHS members Geoff and Jenny Dainty will share this occasion with us in their home. Please register for catering purposes: [info@mtalberthistoricalsociety.org.nz](mailto:info@mtalberthistoricalsociety.org.nz) or 846 4509.

## In memoriam

### **Willie Goldie, 9 June 1939 – 17 January 2019**

With sadness, we acknowledge Willie's death, and remember the contribution he made over many years to the Mount Albert Historical Society, particularly latterly as the faithful right-hand man of our Treasurer, Judith Goldie. Willie was a respected and loved colleague and teacher at Mount Albert Grammar School, and then at St Kentigern College where he taught for 28 years. He will be much missed, and our sincere condolences go to Judith and their family.

## A Vernon Brown House?



*88 Kitenui Avenue, house built for Sam and Mollie Leathem*

The house at 88 Kitenui Avenue, Mount Albert, was commissioned by Sam and Mollie Leathem (refer to Newsletter 13, MAHS) while they were renting down the road in Wairere Avenue. They moved in in 1937 when they had just one child. It was on a large double section that Sam planted with native trees, an orchard, and a vegetable garden. A member of the family still lives in the house, but the spare section was sold in the '90s and some of the trees came down.

Peter Leathem believes the house was designed by Allan Tizard. The builder was definitely the stalwart unionist Jim McCormick, who lived in Woodward Road. Also certain is that an extension to the attic was proposed in 1945 (but never built) and drawings to that end were executed by the well-known architect Vernon Brown, a pioneering modernist in Auckland who became a popular lecturer at the university's School of Architecture in the 1940s and '50s, and a major influence on the students known as Group Architects. While no designs for the house itself have come to light, signed drawings for Brown's extension are with the City Council.

Allan Tizard had been elected to the Auckland Branch of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in November 1935, but his practice seems not to have been especially prolific, at least

not in the field of domestic architecture. The invaluable file of documents about New Zealand architects held by the University of Auckland's Architecture Library, known as the Sheppard Collection, reveals a number of projects by him. The Plant Research Station, Mount Albert, was one, as were Penrose High School (now One Tree Hill College), the swimming pool and hall at Auckland Girls' Grammar School, and a few other public buildings. But no houses are recorded, unless one counts the Alpine Sports Club (designed as a 'log cabin') in the Waitakere Ranges, for which he acted as 'Honorary Architect'.<sup>1</sup>

This isn't to say that there were no houses by Tizard, especially in his early career. They just didn't attract Peter Sheppard's attention.

It is tempting to believe, however, that the architect of 88 Kitenui Avenue was Vernon Brown, making his re-employment a natural step. It would be tidy, too, if it could be shown that Brown was employed by Tizard at the time; underlings didn't get their names on plans. However, the years before Brown set up on his own in 1937, he spent in the offices of a number of well-known architects, just not Tizard's.<sup>2</sup>

Also possibly supporting Brown's involvement is the slight resemblance of 88 to a house in Takapuna that he is known to have designed, which was written up in *Home and Building*, May 1939.<sup>3</sup> It was the house of Mr and Mrs G Thorne George in Campbell Road. It, like the Leathem house, adhered to an Arts and Crafts philosophy arising from a detestation



*Campbell Road house of Mr and Mrs G Thorne George*

of the word ‘style’ and a respect for function and the honest use of materials over applied ornament.

Both were weatherboarded with vertical battens to cover joins animating parts of the exterior – in both cases, in gables and upper parts of the house, but also for much of the back of the Mount Albert house. The *Home and Building* article pointedly dissociates the battens from the then fashionable (and purely decorative) use of half-timbering. Kitenui Avenue extends battens on stained (not painted) timber panelling to the main circulation spaces of the interior as well. Unadorned red brick is used for the fireplace surrounds in the main rooms. Decoration is limited to cornices with a simple beaded pattern. And there is a lead-lighted glass cabinet in the dining room.

Whoever the architect was, he worked closely with Sam and Mollie to ensure convenience and comfort. Unusual features for the time included an open hatch between bathroom and laundry, a fold-down ironing board, and a shoe-polishing station in the laundry. Built-in seating and a divan are features of the main living spaces and sun-porch, and there are copious built-in wardrobes and cupboards. Whitney or bi-folding windows are used widely through the house for maximum ventilation in summer, as well as ordinary casements. Brass window fittings survive as does a row of brass coat-hooks in the hallway and the original front-door knocker and knob.

There was an internal staircase to storage in the roof and a study where Sam could escape the pandemonium of the growing family. He was an accountant with Ambler and Co. – makers of Summit Shirts (Aertex for summer and viyella for winter) – rising to the position of Managing Director. In due course his study – with its own small roof deck – was claimed as bedroom space for the older boys. It was at this stage that Vernon Brown was called in to design the not-to-be-executed extension to the attic. The house as a whole is a pretty-thorough exercise in Arts and Crafts design, going further it

would appear than the Takapuna house by Brown. To my mind 88 is the more interesting and attractive building with its typical Arts and Crafts not-quite symmetry to the street frontage.

Vernon Brown was the darling of Auckland’s political Left and arty intelligentsia to which the Leathems belonged. His credentials as part of that set were established in a short piece about him in *Home and Building* in 1948: ‘Dislikes all forms of physical and hearty exercise’, it firmly stated.<sup>4</sup> While the family was young, 88 Kitenui Avenue was the scene of numerous parties, attended by members of Auckland’s ‘Bohemian’ circles.

Some of the Leathems’ friends, such as Frank and Honey Haigh (he a left-wing lawyer), the printer Bob Lowry and wife Irene, and the artist Joan Smith and husband Fred, were owners of houses by Brown.<sup>5</sup> Sam and Mollie had met through the Student Christian Movement at Auckland University College as it was then known.

In time they lost their religion but adhered for the rest of their lives to principles of tolerance and charity. They were lifelong supporters of the Labour Party.

There were lots of children: biological, adopted, and fostered, not to mention those belonging to friends and half the neighbourhood who regarded 88 as a second home. There was a large and shifting population over the years at the Leathem house, which operated an open-door policy, literally. It was not uncommon at the time for doors to be left unlocked.

Whether Tizard or Brown or another person entirely was the architect, 88 Kitenui Avenue is a fine if modest example of the Arts and Crafts style, which has survived largely unchanged for 80 years.

Don Bassett, 2018



88 Kitenui Avenue back view with small roof deck

1. *Auckland Star* 15/4/1935, p5. At the highest point of the ranges with views to the Kaipara, Piha, and Muriwai.
2. It seems he was with Aimer, Grierson, and Draffin, designers of the Museum, and also Wade and Bartley. Then, sources say, because of the Depression, architects were laid off and Vernon Brown got work where he could.
3. *Home and Building*, v3, no. 3, May 1939, pp9–10.
4. *Home and Building*, v10, no. 3, April–May 1948.
5. The Haigh house in Bell Road, Remuera, was moved to a site near the Kaipara Harbour a few years ago; the Lowry house was in Gladwin Road, One Tree Hill; the Smith house was in Cape Horn Road, Waikowhai. Fred Smith was a brother of well-known artist May Smith.