


#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 20 Travel

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#52 Ancestors 2020

Week 20 - Travel

Very few Australians were privileged enough to travel to the other side of the world in the early 20th century. It was a very long way, very slow and very expensive. That's one of the reasons why so many were eager to enlist when the Great War broke out in 1914 – ***In a letter to his mother, John Simpson Kirkpatrick remarked on the enthusiasm with which Australians had “embraced the declaration of war”. The idea that the war would be over by Christmas, and that this was a good opportunity to see the world, was not lost on many.****

My two great uncles, Albert and Alf, left Australia in 1912 on a different mission. Both young men had trained as Methodist parsons, and their visit was partly to attend a Methodist Conference in Liverpool, England. They also planned a visit to Ireland to the home and family that their father, Anthony, (my great grandfather) had left in the 1860s.

The ship SS Osterley sailed from Sydney on 10 April 1912 and travelled to Tasmania, then to Melbourne, where they stayed several days. (Here Alf records his reading about the Titanic, which sank on 12 April).#

From Melbourne, they went to Adelaide and across the Great Australian Bight to Fremantle. On Sunday 21 April, Alf writes:

Morning service was held on the top deck the preacher being Mr Steward (Church of Xst)(sic). He broke down in his voice and I filled in the breach. At 3pm we held a children's service followed by a bible class.

AT 6.45 I conducted the service in the large dining saloon. About 230 people were present. The singing again was very good. I preached on God is Spirit, Light and Love. Every one gave me their best attention although at the time I was weak from seasickness.



Albert Whitten 1912

On to Colombo, where they took a rickshaw to view the Great Buddhist temple and called on the American Baptist Mission before reboarding the ship and setting off for Suez, where they

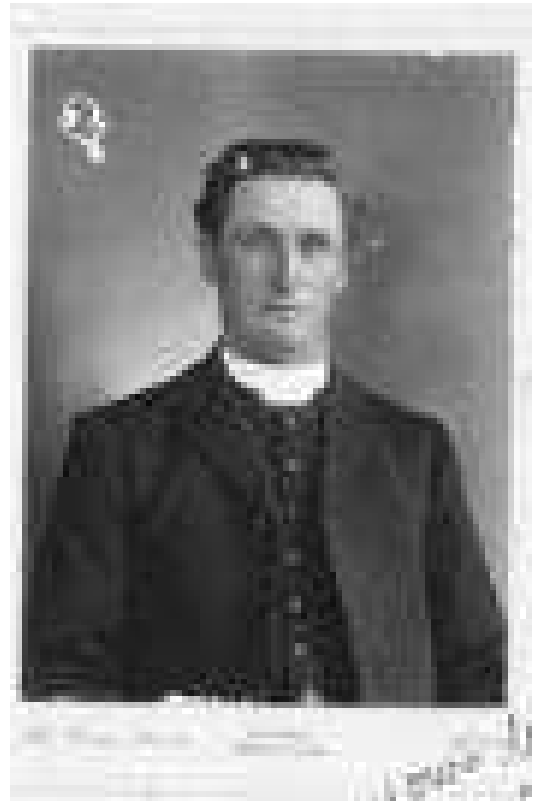
disembarked at Port Said and took a train to Cairo.

There is ample photographic and written evidence of the attractions of Cairo experienced by the young Australians who found themselves there at the beginning of World War 1. Alf and Albert did the tourist trail too – they visited the Sphinx and the Pyramids and the museums, but they also found time to go to church and to the American Mission. They were very serious young men.

They took a steamer to Jaffa and then went on to Jerusalem by train.

From the diary:

The route is by luxurious gardens and orange and lemon groves and every mile of country through which the track runs is associated with events in the early life of the Jewish nation. The first station is Lydda, the home of St George the dragon killer, and the scene of many exciting events during the Crusades. Next is that of Ramleh, the reputed home of Joseph of Arimathaea. At the railway stations are crowds of children and women with great nosegays of brilliant colours which they offer for a penny, and large baskets of oranges and other fruits for any price that the passengers will pay. We cross the famous Plains of Sharon whose fields are radiant with wild flowers – myriads of narcissus, blue iris, rose of Sharon, and lilies fo the valley. In this Valley of Sharon the flower of chivalry, the gallant Crusaders fought; over yonder is Timnath where Samson set fire to the Philistines' corn; we pass the Valley of Ajalon where Joshua commanded the moon to stand still; and the little village over the next slope of hills is Kirjath Jearim, where the Ark remained for twenty years in the house of Abinadab. Soon the train winds out into the dark gorges of the mountains, crosses the boundaries of Judea and eventually Jerusalem.



Alf Whitten in 1912

From Jerusalem the two men travelled to England via Europe. The diary records that in Paris they saw an aeroplane, probably the first they had ever seen. Unusually for a couple of Methodists, they visited the Vatican. In England they went to Crystal Palace for a performance of Handel's Messiah with a cast of 4000 – an event which Albert referenced in his Easter sermons for years afterwards.

I was especially interested in their experiences in Ireland, where they stayed at **Fancroft**, the family home near Roscrea from which their father had departed more than 40 years before.

The incumbent was Ned Whitten, their cousin, and his family which included his small daughter Marjorie. It was she who welcomed me when I visited some 50 years later.

Most of their time here was spent in visiting and drinking cups of tea with various relatives but Alf also notes:

Attended the Fair in Roscrea. It seemed strange to see cattle sheep and horses, pigs in the streets and the buyers and sellers chatting and driving a hard bargain. There was a fine little mob of Irish ponies, rounded up in the streets. 42 publicans in Roscrea...

And on Sunday 4 August:

11am attended Methodist Church, Roscrea and heard Rev. Harris preach then at 12 went to Church of Ireland and heard a good sermon from a curate. Afternoon sang, talked. Evening took the service for Rev. Harris. 1 Cor. 1.31. Good congregation, good singing. Fair time in the pulpit.

Alf and Albert sailed for the United States on the four funnel "Olympic" the sister ship of the Titanic. They enrolled at the Drew Theological Seminary in New Jersey, but Alf left after six weeks and began his journey home, travelling via Canada, Hawaii and New Zealand. Albert stayed on at Drew for a year, then transferred to Boston University School of Theology before being ordained and accepting a parish in Maine. He married in the United States and lived there for the rest of his life.



Fancroft - undated photo

Alf came home and married his sweetheart, Ethel, the following year. He began a long career as a Methodist Minister across NSW.

Alf's grandchildren and other family members of their generation have travelled often and easily to Europe, to the United States and Canada, and especially back to Fancroft, which was sold out of the family after more than 300 years in 2016. While we would all no doubt attest to strange and wonderful experiences, it is difficult to imagine the wonder that these two farm boys must have felt at the exotic sights and sounds of their voyage in 1912.

*Anzac Voices, Australian War Memorial

The SS Osterley did service with the AIF as a troopship during WW1.