

# The Fitzroy History Society Inc. Newsletter

## March 2001

### Welcome

First of all, thanks to all our wonderful members who supported the Society last year by attending our activities, being involved in heritage issues, providing information, responding to queries, and subscribing early in the year.

Our program this year has been finalised and is enclosed with this newsletter. As usual, our early focus is on Heritage Week (30 March – 8 April). This year's theme, set by the National Trust, is 'Celebrate Gold and Federation-Victoria'.

We also expect that this year, as in previous years, the Society will be involved in the heritage issues that regularly confront the suburb. In particular, the future of the Fitzroy Town Hall is by no means settled, with an unsatisfactory outcome about renovations being reached by the City of Yarra.

Thank you to all our members who supported the Society's efforts to have this most important building properly preserved. We intend to keep a watching brief on the building and will keep you informed of any developments.

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, I'd like to wish all members the best for 2001. We look forward to seeing you at our activities—our walks, talks and social functions.

And finally, a reminder that our very reasonable subscriptions are now due.

*John Senyard—Convenor*

### Social Justice Walk

Last April, the Society conducted a very successful walk around the sites of important and landmark social justice events in Fitzroy. A former Society committee member, Annabel Barbara, taped the walk as it happened. Recently, Brian Stagoll who was one of the organisers, transcribed the tape.

The result is a document which vividly records the speakers and their voices and brings to life the various social justice struggles that have taken place in Fitzroy. Copies of the document are available from the Society for \$5. Please send a cheque or postal order to PO Box 180 Fitzroy 3065.

### Brunswick Street

As you are probably aware, the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) has recently placed Brunswick Street on its register as 'an essential part of Australia's heritage and must be preserved for future generations to enjoy'. The Statement of Significance reads:

'The shopping strip of Brunswick Street, Fitzroy developed from the 1840s and predominantly dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is of State historical, architectural and social significance.

Historically, Brunswick Street was the first significant shopping area outside the city, described as rivalling Bourke Street in the 1850s. It developed as a major general shopping precinct by the 1900s, when it was overtaken in pre-eminence by Smith Street, Chapel Street and the ever-growing city stores.

The following decline was not reversed until its establishment as an 'alternative' shopping strip from the 1980s, reinvigorating the now well preserved building stock.

Architecturally, Brunswick Street is notable as a particularly cohesive and intact 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century shopping strip, which includes a number of individually significant shop/house and shop/warehouse developments, such as the Beswicke Building, the post office and early hotels. In some instances the buildings' size is testimony to the success and aspirations of the people who traded and shopped in the street.

There is also an unusually high proportion of original 19<sup>th</sup> century shopfronts for the metropolitan context. The urban picture created by the building stock is further enhanced by the intactness of most upper-floor facades, and the tram route, which still runs along the street. The view of St Patrick's Cathedral is one of the major urban vistas in the whole of Melbourne and is comparable with the view to the Shrine along St Kilda Road.

Socially, Brunswick Street has played an important role in serving the diverse population of Fitzroy, including the artisans and working classes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the low-income residents particularly of the numerous boarding houses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the large number of migrants after the Second World War.

From the 1980s Brunswick Street has been considered Melbourne's most 'Bohemian' and varied shopping strip, quite distinct from other shopping strips in the inner city. It is home to a range of shops, bars and cafes catering to a clientele looking for a creative, challenging or socially aware experience. Visitors value the interesting ambience, the egalitarian feel of the place and the artistic expression in the signs and street furniture.'

### Virgonas

There are probably many people who regularly pass the bar and club named *Virgonas* at 231 Brunswick Street without realising that the name has a special link with Fitzroy. In the 1920s Antonio Virgona and his wife Velia had a wine bar at this address. They expanded the business, building a huge cellar to carry about 90,000 litres in hogsheads and quarter casks. The family processed thousands of bottles monthly and sold bulk wine at 2/6 a flagon. Their son Mario later ran a successful restaurant there (grilled steaks, barbecued chicken, pasta, dura bread and wine—*Virgonas* acquired one of the first restaurant licences), which attracted senior businessmen such as the then Lord Mayor of Melbourne. In 1968 Mario retired, leased the business then later sold it. Thirty-three years later, the shopfront still bears the *Virgona* name. *Adapted from the National Trust's Classification Report for Brunswick Street.*

### Help!

I've asked before (and no-one could help me) so I'm having one last stab. Who remembers the huge electric MacRobertson sign atop the Old Gold building in Rose Street? Evidently the sign flashed the MacRobertson signature and was a landmark from 1922 when it was erected. When was it demolished? Please contact the Society or Jill Robertson on 9419 8868.

### SUBSCRIPTIONS NOW DUE!!!

Subscriptions for the Fitzroy History Society are from January to December. Please send your subscription to PO Box 180 Fitzroy 3065. Pay \$5 yearly or \$10 for 2 years.

#### Executive Committee—1998-1999

Convenor: John Senyard  
Treasurer: Harold Mackrell  
Secretary: Shared role  
Publicity: Margaret Lee  
Editor: Jill Robertson (9419 8868)

## Federation Builders of North Fitzroy

Join well-known architectural historian and broadcaster Alan Willingham as he leads a walk around North Fitzroy explaining what constitutes Federation architecture, describing some of the builders, and showing us some fine examples of the Federation style.

**When:** Sunday 1 April, 2001

**Time:** 10.30 am

**Venue:** Rotunda, Edinburgh Gardens, North Fitzroy  
Melways 30 E12 or 2C C1  
Tram stop No. 20 Brunswick Street

**Cost:** \$2 members      \$5 non-members

### Fitzroy's Federation Links

The following information is adapted from the January 2001 edition of the *Queenscliffe Herald*, which in turn is part of an article by Judith Harley published in the March 1988 edition of the *Journal of the Royal Historical Society*. Thanks to Society members Ron and Jacqueline Slattery for sending it to us.

In 1926 the Historical Society of Victoria placed a memorial tablet on a cottage in George Street, Fitzroy. The inscription read: 'The Honourable Alfred Deakin was born in this house on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1856. Thrice Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia.' The cottage has since been demolished and the tablet's whereabouts are unknown. Some time later, the family moved to a cottage in Gore Street, Fitzroy and in 1863 moved this cottage to South Yarra. It, too, has been demolished. (The house Deakin built in 1905 for his family—*Ballara* at Point Lonsdale— is still standing.)

Alfred Deakin became a barrister and was elected to Victoria's Legislative Assembly when he was 22 years of age. During the 1880s he was Minister of Public Works, Water Supply, Solicitor General and then Chief Secretary. He was Victoria's delegate to the Imperial Conference in London in 1887 and it was here that he realised that the Australian colonies must 'speak with one voice'. From 1890 until 1900 he devoted himself to bringing about Federation. He was a member for Ballarat in the first Federal Parliament and Attorney-General in the nation's first cabinet. He helped to draft the legislation for the new Commonwealth.

He was Prime Minister of Australia 1903-1904, 1905-1908, 1909-1910. And he was born in Fitzroy!