

Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society's

Historical *Digest*



Monograph

to coincide with the 125th Anniversary of the

Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW - 2010

Whatever Happened to Albert?

The life and legacy of Albert Griffin

One hundred years ago the story of the conversion of Albert Griffin and his work in setting up the first Church of Christ in Sydney would have had wide appeal to church members. This story seemed to exemplify Stone-Campbell ideals in relation to the authority and accessibility of scriptures, the role of the Holy Spirit in the conversion, and the obligations of the believer in respect of discipleship. Griffin worked energetically to establish a church, but after an auspicious start dropped from sight. What happened? This monograph traces the latter years of Griffin's life and evaluates his legacy.

Various accounts of Griffin's conversion exist, but the succinct account of AW Stephenson captures something of the young Griffin's despair at his failure to experience a Holy Spirit sign of his salvation:

In 1851 Albert Griffin established a grocery store in Sydney on the corner of Goulburn and Pitt Streets. He had been distressed by the religious views of the day concerning the way of salvation. He thought he had to wait for the call of the Holy Spirit in some unusual manifestation. When he did not have such a manifestation, he fell into a state of total despair even thinking of taking his life. Then he received a box of books from his brother Eleazer Griffin.

(Stephenson, *Victories of a Century*, Melbourne: 1985, p 12)

Griffin came to Australia from England in 1849 as an eighteen year old partially assisted immigrant. On the way to Australia he met Isabella whom he subsequently married. Among the books he received from Eleazer, were copies of the *British Millennial Harbinger*. Eleazer was a member St. Pancras Church of Christ in London. The reading of this material persuaded Griffin that a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit was not necessary as proof of salvation.

Griffin met up with Henry Mitchell, a disciple from New Zealand, and in 1852 they set up the Lord's Table in the back of Griffin's shop on the corner of Pitt and Goulburn Streets and began to propagate the 'ancient order'. This included open-air



Albert Griffin

Photo source: AB Maston, ed., Jubilee Pictorial History, p 306.

preaching for which their Wesleyan backgrounds well prepared them.

Disturbed by Griffin's influence, local Wesleyans (perhaps at the instigation of Isabella's parents) sent Joseph Kingsbury to counsel him and bring him back to the fold. In the biography, recorded in the *Jubilee Pictorial History* (p341), Kingsbury tells of his encounter with the young Griffin:

About this time I was requested to visit a young man who had just married into their family, to remove his doubts, as he was sceptical about the Holy Spirit; I went armed as I thought with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. I found him courteous and open to conviction, and he assured me he believed in the Holy Spirit and its work, and opening his New Testament he requested me show my evidence that the Spirit worked on the heart without means [meaning outside of a response to the Word of God].

It is interesting, perhaps significant in the light of subsequent developments, that Kingsbury does not mention Griffin by name in the *Jubilee Pictorial History* account. Griffin's calm handling of Kingsbury is a good example of personal evangelism. He was a relatively inexperienced 21 years old. Kingsbury was an experienced and knowledgeable lay preacher many years his elder at age 36. Nevertheless, the encounter disturbed Kingsbury, who himself had been on a spiritual journey. Thereafter, Kingsbury began to take a different approach in preaching:

I began to preach a different answer to those inquiring 'what must I do to be saved'? I gave the same answer that the inspired Peter gave the thousands on the day of Pentecost [Acts 2:38].

Kingsbury soon found his position with the Wesleyans untenable and withdrew from them. He continued, however, to preach in the open air. Picton was later to note that "the founders of the church were men of strong convictions and were mighty in the scriptures. Some had been local preachers and they all appear to have been fond of argument" (<http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/gchapman/nof/NOF1C.HTM> - page 103) Perhaps it might have been better to have said "they were good apologists for what they believed in".

On the 4th September 1853 Kingsbury was baptized along with Edward Lewis, David Lewis and John Standin(g) in the Cooks River, not far from Newtown. These men, along with Mitchell and Griffin, played a formative role in the establishment of

The First Congregation?

There were, of course, other pioneers in NSW and due regard must be paid to men like Stimson and Hodges whose association in Western Sydney (Bethany, or Fairfield as it later became) preceded that of Griffin by a year. Like the Griffins, Stimson and Hodges had been Wesleyan Methodists, but Hodges had apparently come under the influence of Alexander Campbell in England in 1847.

It may well be that the story of the development of Churches of Christ in NSW has been influenced by the prominence of the Newton/Enmore group. RC Gilmour, writing in the *Jubilee Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in Australasia* (Melbourne: 1903, p.305) notes that Stimson and Hodges "have not received the recognition that they should because they were not so conspicuous in the public advocacy of the truth as some others who came later on". The Stimson family was also active within Churches of Christ for many years. However, what is important is not who was first but how the Holy Spirit worked through different people around the same time to commence the work in NSW. And since one of the formative debates were about how the Holy Spirit worked in people's lives, that is appropriate.

In 1866 the groups at Fairfield, Newtown and Sydney (Elizabeth Street) formed an Evangelist Committee for the purpose of engaging a full time minister. This was the origin of co-operative work in NSW.

Churches of Christ in NSW. Kingsbury became the first President of the NSW Conference (1886) and Edward Lewis moved to Bethany (named after Bethany, West Virginia, USA) in 1861 became a full time evangelist (the first in NSW) and served effectively in Victoria at Prahran and in New Zealand where he became known as the "the grand old man of the New Zealand churches" (J Hilder, cited in *Diamond Jubilee Conference (NSW) Handbook*, p18). The little church that they helped establish became Newtown Church of Christ (which later relocated to Enmore when it outgrew its original premises) and Enmore became the 'mother' church in NSW. By 1900, with a membership of over 600, it became one of the largest Churches of Christ in Australia. Members with family roots in Enmore are still to be found in many churches in NSW.

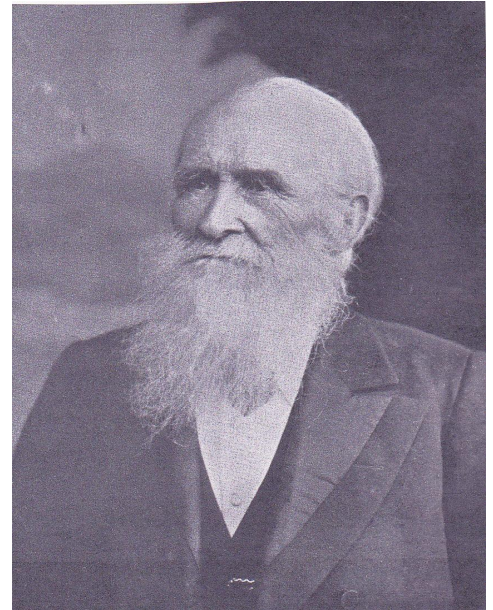
In the short term, Griffin continued as spokesperson for the little Sydney (Newtown) congregation. Writing to the *British Millennial Harbinger* in 1854 "on behalf of the brotherhood" (named as George Taylor, Henry Mitchell and Joseph Kingsbury) Griffin tells of his conversion experience and reports on the baptisms previously mentioned. He also reports the baptism of "Sisters Standing, Kingsbury and Griffin, our excellent consorts, previously Wesleyan", together with the addition of others (*British Millennial Harbinger*, 1854, p 380). The delay in Isabella's baptism may have had something to do with the earlier family objection.

In a further letter dated 25 June 1855, Griffin sadly reports the death of Mary Mitchell, the wife of his early associate Henry. He expresses satisfaction that "the brethren here [are]... very zealous... continuing to proclaim in the open air the gospel of Jesus" and regrets the failure to send hymn books and New Testaments for the little church. This does not sound like someone who is depressed or about to defect or depart. But depart he did. HG Picton, writing in the *Christian Pioneer* in 1897, notes:

Albert Griffin, for a while did good service to the infant cause but ultimately drifted out of fellowship. Sometime after he removed to Victoria... he died, having severed all connection with the church he was instrumental in forming.

So what happened to Albert?

Picton is perhaps a little unfair to Griffin who moved to situations where regular communion with other Disciples was difficult, if not impossible. It seems that around 1856 Griffin sold his business in Sydney and joined the gold rush to



Joseph Kingsbury, c 1900
(Photo Source: *Jubilee Pictorial History*, p 304)

In 1885 Dr Kingsbury became the first President of the Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW.

Beechworth, Victoria where he staked a claim. He joined thousands of others in the scramble for gold but he did connect with the small Churches of Christ group there. This group met in the tent home of James L. Ingram who had moved there in 1855 from Melbourne/Prahran where he had also been involved in the establishment of churches.

In a fascinating letter to the *British Millennial Harbinger* (January, 1859), Ingram reports on the difficulties of commencing a church in a community characterized by "all manner of wickedness". Having migrated from Britain, Ingram's advice was intended for potential immigrants who were attracted to Australia by the gold discoveries. Ingram's donation to the Evangelist Fund is interesting in the light of the dire circumstances at Beechworth. Ingram writes:

For about two years we tried to seek out all who professed to be followers of Jesus, to induce them to meet with us and attend to the ordinance of Christ [Lord's Supper] my partner and I continued to meet by ourselves. At length, Mitchell and Griffin arrived in this district and we were comforted and encouraged by their coming, but the nature of their pursuits being so unsettled and migratory (being miners) they were prevented from meeting with us often.

The Mitchell mentioned here is almost certainly Griffin's erstwhile associate from Sydney. Their departure from Sydney must have been a blow to the fledgling congregation.

Griffin appeared to be not very successful at mining, and around 1860 sold his claim and with the proceeds bought a farm at Barnawatha, not far from Albury. Since the township of Barnawatha was not surveyed and settled until 1860, Griffin and his wife must be regarded as among the first settlers in that part of Victoria. One can only imagine the difficulties of setting up a farm and raising a large family in that (then) isolated community. This would have been a lonely existence for the Griffins, particularly for Isabella as the primary carer of a large family. An 'Albert Griffin' was appointed a trustee of the Chiltern (not far from Barnawatha) Cemetery in 1862 suggesting that he was a landowner and a person of repute, but since there were other Griffins living in the area the identification with the subject of this monograph is not certain.

It appears that the hard years at Beechworth and Barnawatha began to take their toll on Griffin. He was an articulate, reflective, idealistic person inclined to agonize over his failings (as his earlier concerns about the Holy Spirit indicate) and was possibly unsuited to the hard, lonely life of mining.

The Wisdom of James Ingram
(Writing to James Wallis of the
British Millennial Harbinger from
Camp Street, Beechworth in 1859)

On conditions in Beechworth:
"The great mass attracted to the new goldfield are bent on one object ...it is the pursuit of fleeting riches....this is made painfully manifest by the fearless recklessness with which they plunge into the most abandoned excesses. All manner of wickedness abound at such a time."

On the importance of continuing to meet together: "It is lamentable that many, especially young Christians have been disheartened and gone back to the world through being deprived of Christian society and being thrown amongst the worldly and ungodly. I would... entreat all who intend leaving for these colonies, by all means, *never*, even under the most discouraging circumstances, neglect to meet together."

On the importance of families:
"A word of advice to those leaving their native land for these colonies. *Do not leave home unless you bring your wives and families with you!*"

On giving to others: "I have added a small mite to the Evangelist fund. Although we have many objects still needing help, I am anxious to throw in my mite with you, in the glorious work of proclaiming the love of God to perishing sinners in my mother land."

Depressed, and with feelings of failure, he became an alcoholic and tragically died in 1885 at the relatively young age of 54. Drinking was an occupational hazard for miners – providing not just a temporary escape from the rigours of the lifestyle but an opportunity for socializing and access to important information. But this was the heyday of the temperance movement – the consumption of alcohol was frowned upon by many non-conformists and totally disapproved of by Griffin's former Wesleyan associates. This would have alienated him from them, and possibly Griffin from himself.

By that time, most of Griffin's family had grown up and many had moved away (some interstate). It is sad that he who had been instrumental in establishing a vibrant Christian community did not have the support of just such a community as he entered 'the slough of despond'. Ingram's observations (as quaint as they might seem today) were pertinent – fellowship is more than camaraderie. Henry Mitchell, who might have been able to offer support at this time apparently had also moved on and was reported by Picton in 1897 as living in Mudgee, NSW, apparently unaffected by the Beechworth experience, and still in association with the church. A photo of the ageing Mitchell appears in the *Jubilee Pictorial History* (p.308) and may be compared with the studio portrait of the young Griffin appearing in the same publication (p.306).

Isabella and members of the Griffin family, however, continued their association with Churches of Christ. Isabella moved to Melbourne not long after Albert's death, possibly with younger members of her family. Albert and Isabella's second daughter, Annie Louise, married Charles Evans in 1881 and moved to Adelaide. With their daughter Alberta Isabella (significantly, named after her grandparents) they later moved to Warrnambool and seemed to have been associated briefly with the new church (established 1875) there. Two or three years later, Annie and Charles moved to Melbourne where they bought a grocery store [shades of Albert!]. Alberta Isabella recalled as a child "walking through the streets with church bells chiming, attending Swanston Street church, and then home to Grandma (Isabella) Griffin's house for dinner and tea". Isabella Griffin died in Melbourne in 1906 and was buried at Barnawatha alongside her husband.

When Alberta was seven, the Evans family moved to Sydney and took up residence at Erskineville. Here they renewed the family acquaintance with the Enmore church, walking for half-an-hour each Sunday to attend services. Charles went to work for Marcus Clark (described as "a relative", although the connection is not clear) in his drapery store. The link with

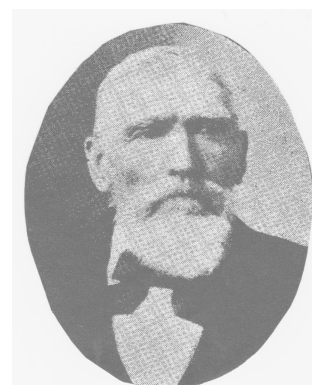
Legend of the Golden Horseshoes

A story preserved by one branch of the Griffin family is that the miner who acquired Albert Griffin's claim at Beechworth struck a rich vein of gold and made such a fortune he was able to ride through Beechworth on a horse shod with golden horseshoes.

If the story is true, it might have influenced Griffin's subsequent perception of failure. It seems, however, that the family may have incorporated some local folklore into their story. There is a legend about such an episode and to this day Beechworth celebrates a "Festival of the Golden Horseshoes". But this legend appears to be based on a dispute between miners before Griffin arrived in Beechworth.

The horseshoe episode, if true, is an example what Ingram referred to as "fearless recklessness...and the most abandoned excesses". Beechworth was a tough town!

Ref: www.beechworth.com.au



*Henry Mitchell (c.1897) in Jubilee Pictorial History.
He was an early associate of Griffin in Sydney and Beechworth*

Marcus Clark resurrected a distant Griffin family connection with Joseph Kingsbury. Alberta Isabella Evans married Arthur L Carter in 1909. Arthur Carter was active at Erskineville church and served for a number of years on the NSW Home Missions Committee. During the 1940s he was heavily involved in the establishment of the Wentworth Falls (Blue Mountains) Church of Christ where he served in a ministerial capacity for many years. Their daughter Thelma Young and her family moved to North Turramurra Church of Christ around 1966 and fully participated in all aspects of the church's activity at that early stage of its development. She and her family are remembered with affection by older members at North Turramurra.

In 2002, the NSW Christian Women's Fellowship held a sesquicentenary luncheon at which Thelma Young, Albert Griffin's great granddaughter, was the guest of honour. The luncheon was held in the function room of David Jones Department store in Sydney – not far from the site of Griffin's shop. Thelma is now living in a nursing home on the NSW Central Coast.

The foregoing briefly traces one line of Albert and Isabella's descendants. The pioneering instinct, however, continued through other branches of the family. The *Victoria/Tasmania Conference News*, August 2009, briefly tells the story of Richard Brown, a great, great grandson of the Griffins. Richard is descended from Fanny Martha Hall (nee Griffin), Albert and Isabella's seventh child. His maternal grandparents, Mabel and Henry Bell were involved with Williamstown and Gardner churches. Their daughter Velma and her husband Les Brown, along with their son Richard, were part of a church plant at Knoxfield initiated by Boronia church 47 years ago, and they thus became foundation members of the new church. After a career in law, Richard enrolled as a student at CCTC Mulgrave in 2007. In discussing his late age vocation, Richard has acknowledged the people who have encouraged him in his journey of faith including his parents and grandparents.

Concluding Comments

Despite the feelings of failure that dogged his last years, Albert Griffin did important pioneering work in establishment of Churches of Christ in NSW. This pioneering work is reflected in the quality of the early converts who owed much to their Wesleyan backgrounds. In the Sydney (Newtown) story it is possible to see something of the Jerusalem-Judaea -Samaria phenomenon (Acts 1:8) as the direct and indirect fruits of this mission spread around Australia and overseas.

Marcus Clark and his connection with Churches of Christ

Henry Marcus Clark was a member of Enmore Church of Christ and great benefactor of the church at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was an interesting character. Having worked in rural Victoria, he moved to Newtown around 1880. It is not clear what prompted this move but one account suggests that it was possibly "because of the religious beliefs he shared with Mayor Joseph Kingsbury". One source says that the young Marcus Clark "bought Joseph Kingsbury's store on time payment from February 1883" (and that) "he started work in the drapery store run by Joseph Kingsbury's second son John". [John Kingsbury's photograph appears on page 339 of the *Jubilee Pictorial History*]

Clark married Martha Anne Day (known as Pattie), an employee of Kingsbury and possibly the daughter of George Day, an early Enmore minister, and a sister/or half-sister of Arthur Day who was a Lexington College of the Bible student. (See pages 306 and 313 in *Jubilee Pictorial History*).

Marcus Clark and Co. eventually became one of Australia's largest department stores with branches across suburban and regional NSW. The large Marcus Clark department store building still stands in Railway Square Sydney and it now houses offices.
Ref: www.sydneymarchives.info/biographies

Within fifty years the original little congregation had grown into a large church – one of the largest Churches of Christ in Australia. Griffin had agonized over how the Holy Spirit was to be experienced in the life of the new convert. But perhaps the work of the Holy Spirit is best manifested through the faith perseverance of the whole community. The church is greater than the individuals who comprise it, and stronger than any one member of it. However, the issue of one's personal experience of the Holy Spirit has never quite gone away and continues in subtle forms in the wider church.

For a time, things were not easy for the original church. There must have been times after the departure of Griffin and Mitchell in 1856, or that of Lewis in 1866 (to undertake evangelistic work New Zealand), when it would have been tempting to allow the little church to fold. But the Newtown believers hung on – just as Ingram was 'hanging on' in Beechworth, Victoria. The pioneers were a hardy, resilient lot. They were tough times, they had an unpopular message, few facilities, no attractive music (worship was probably a capella), no trained ministers and rudimentary means of transport. But they did have some pretty firm ideas about the Word of God and they were good apologists.

While much is owed in an institutional sense to Albert Griffin, recognition must also be made of the role of Isabella Griffin. The Griffins had twelve children – one child died. Life could not have been easy for Isabella at Beechworth or Barnawatha, particularly as Albert succumbed to the black dog of depression. Hers would have been the primary role of raising the family. But it is clear that as late as 1900 Grandma Isabella was still at the centre of family life. It is perhaps more of a tribute to her that some her descendants continued to serve in pioneering roles in our churches. The epithet on her gravestone is appropriate: "Strength after strength, crown after Cross, rest after weariness, sweet rest at last".

Families like those of Griffin, Stimson, Kingsbury, and Lewis played a significant, cohesive role in the early Churches of Christ connection.

Harold Hayward



<http://www.rootsweb.com/~ausvsac/Index.htm>

Bethany, New South Wales?

Before official place names were allocated, the western Sydney Disciples, in consultation with other settlers, called their district Bethany. This followed the example of Alexander Campbell whose influence was extended to Australia originally by British immigrants. But the Australian settlers developed the message in their own way according to their different circumstances.

Australia has its own frontier experience every bit exciting as that of the Stone-Campbell pioneers in the USA.

About the Author

Harold and his wife Jill were foundation (now 'isolated') members of North Turramurra Church of Christ in NSW. They occasionally attend Key to Life Church of Christ in Sorrel, Tasmania. With others, Harold is engaged in writing the recent history of the NSW Conference.

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Feedback

Harold Hayward welcomes your feedback. Comments and observations can be posted on the National Churches of Christ Council Facebook site [[Churchesof ChristNational](#)].

Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society

The ACCHS exists to collect, preserve, make available and educate about the heritage preservation and history of the Churches of Christ in Australia. The Historical Society has extensive archives which are kept at the Churches of Christ Theological College in Mulgrave. If you have items relating to the social, organisational or religious life of Churches of Christ which you would like to donate to the Archives please contact our Historian.

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Articles for publication are sought. Send submissions, including biographies and church histories, to the editor. Obituaries and anniversary news are also welcome.

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