

Ballangeich Wool Bale Creates History



*Geelong Woolsheds
25th February 1915*

Sue Thompson

Introduction

Just before Christmas Val Sheehan showed me a copy of a postcard of Melba which I hadn't seen before. It showed Melba standing in a wool store surrounded by bales of wool.

There was no information on the back of the postcard save a note from the sender to Melba at Coombe Cottage. However, the only clue was the handwritten words: "Geelong Woolsheds 25th February 1915" printed beneath the photograph.

Using that date gradually the story began to unfold of a generous pastoralist determined to make a difference in World War I who donated a bale of wool which directly assisted Belgium soldiers wounded while fighting for their homeland.

None of the research could have been achieved without the resources of Trove, the internet, Mortlake Historical Society.

While Melba's role was only small – only £100 raised, it was her involvement that raised the community's and media's interest in the generous donation of one Western District woman.

Front photograph:

Nellie Melba at the Geelong Exchange with wool bales from Mrs Petersen.

(Photograph from the News of the Week., Geelong.

Wool growers support the war effort

With the outbreak of World War I, Australians from all walks of life were determined to help the war effort. In Brisbane and Sydney pastoralists donated bales of wool to be auctioned with the regular wool sales and the proceeds given to the Belgian Relief Fund. One bale in Brisbane yielded £127 on December 4, 1914.

Perhaps inspired by this, Miss Annie Gordon of “Ballangeich” Ellerslie near Mortlake in the Western District of Victoria donated a bale of the property’s wool to be auctioned at the Geelong Wool Exchange on December 17, 1914.

Miss Gordon had already lost a brother in the war and another – George Herbert Iver Gordon was away fighting. Her brother was Captain Robert Eddington Gordon of the 1st Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment who was killed in action at the Battle of Aisne, France on September 15, 1914. He was 37 years old and unmarried. In 1916 her third brother Harry Campbell Gordon also enlisted. ⁽¹⁾

Geelong Wool Exchange auction

Such was the respect for the family and the donation that the Geelong Wool Exchange auction on December 17, 1914 experienced spirited bidding when Messrs Dalgety and Co put the Ballangeich wool bale up for auction. Each time it was sold, the purchaser donated it back and Dalgety’s auctioned it again. In all, the bale was sold 22 times and yielded a record price of £693 exceeding the price of £500 previously obtained in Sydney. ⁽²⁾

For a complete list of the buyers and what each paid see page 9.

However the final new owners of the bale – Messrs Farnsworth, Stevenson and Co., of America - weren’t happy so they decided to sell it again in the New Year with only wool growers eligible to bid.

Auctioneers Dalgety and Co expressed the hope that “in addition to augmenting the funds in aid of the gallant Belgians, the wool will be used to manufacture a few good khaki overcoats to shelter the men at the front.” ⁽³⁾

Second Geelong Wool Exchange auction

Early in January it was announced that the bale of wool previously sold in Sydney for £500 had been sold in London for £1770 for the war relief fund. ⁽⁴⁾

Spurred on, Victorians were determined to do better. To stimulate interest the Secretary of the Geelong Wool Brokers' Association wrote to *The Argus* newspaper announcing Dalgety and Co would auction off the bale 10 minutes before the next Geelong wool sale to be held on February 18. ⁽⁵⁾

The bale for which £700 (originally £693 but rounded up), had originally been paid, was again auctioned, this time bought and donated back five times which raised a further £300. Then bale was then sold per pound which added another £23 to the Belgian Relief Fund making the total raised £1023. It was purchased by an American buyer Mr Carney. See page 9 for list of buyers. ⁽⁶⁾

Nellie Melba's Geelong Concert

Meanwhile Nellie Melba had been doing her bit for the Red Cross and Belgian Relief Fund. She had given a concert in Adelaide, another in Ballarat and was scheduled to appear at Geelong's His Majesty's Theatre on February 24. As *The Age* newspaper reported:

This historical bale is not done with yet, for it has been presented by Mr Carney to Madame Melba and is to be auctioned off by the famous diva at the patriotic concert which she is so generously giving at Geelong tonight. ⁽⁷⁾

There was also another incentive to raise funds at the concert – country town rivalry. Melba's Ballarat concert on February 22 had raised £800 and the Geelong press played up the rivalry thundering in its headline:

“Can Geelong Beat Ballarat at To-night's concert?” ⁽⁸⁾

When Melba arrived at Geelong on the night of the concert she was serenaded by the Geelong City Band while she stood on the balcony of the Victoria Hotel.

Melba told reporters:

“It's something of an honor,” she said, “to be welcomed by the man in the street. I wonder how many of them will enlist. You know most of

them should.”

Melba had been offered £1000 a year as a wool sales-woman and she offered to be enlisting agent to Geelong men.

After a formal welcome on the balcony by the Geelong Mayor, Melba responded:

“I am a very proud woman to-night, to see so many faces. I am sure you all know how necessary it is that we should work for Great Britain and Australia just now. Perhaps the greatest war the world has known is going on, and I am hoping there will be a great many more recruits from Victoria than there have been yet. If any of you young men want to recruit, will you let me have the honor of putting your name down? We want you all, every one, Good-night and thank you.” Her speech was greeted by thunderous applause as Melba unfurled the Union Jack. ⁽⁹⁾

Melba the auctioneer

The evening took on what was to become a format for Melba’s fund-raising efforts.

Melba appeared on stage and sang the first verse of the National Anthem while the 1500 strong audience waved their miniature flags.

Then Melba started auctioning off the flags of various nations – Russia, France, Japan, Belgium, Australia and Great Britain.

On stage, Melba whooped and hoorayed as the bids for the British flag sold for £175 with two spirited bidders.

Next was the Ballangeich bale of wool which to date had been sold 30 times for £1023.

“I’d like to get another £1000,” was the gentle suggestion from the winsome auctioneer, but when bids stopped at £40 she ventured that Geelong did not like wool. The bale was sold four times and returned £145 for the Belgian Relief Fund. The purchasers were: O.R Flacker £40; H.T. Austin £30; Mrs W.E. Sargood £35 and the Geelong Wool Brokers’ Association £40. This one bale of wool had now raised £1168 for the Belgians.

It was past 10.30pm and Melba had been selling for an hour, not the scheduled 30 minutes.

In that time, the people of Geelong had donated £1485. Of this £650

went to the Belgian Relief Fund and the remainder to the Geelong Red Cross Society. When all sales were finalised a few days later £1500 had been raised.

Geelong residents were quick to point out that the £1485 raised more than doubled that of Ballarat two nights earlier night before and was £200 more than raised in Adelaide a short time earlier. It was also just £2 short of Melba's first concert in Melbourne. ⁽¹⁰⁾

The concert

Despite her auctioneering the concert had to go on. The *Geelong Advertiser* reported:

“Melba's singing was divine, and she sang as one whose soul was welling up with gratitude for a magnificent response and with feeling for the causes she espoused. The velvety beauty of her voice, its undiminished elasticity, and the wonderful clearness of articulation were revealed in a brilliant rendition of the Mad Scene from ‘Lucia’ with a splendid flute obligato by Mr Lemmone.” ⁽¹¹⁾

Melba performed several other items and then it was the turn of other artists: Fred Collier, Mrs John Sanderson, Clara Serena (contralto protégé of Melba's), Doris Madden, John Lemonne and W.L. Paine gave a recital. W. Burrell and F. St Leger were the accompanists.

The concert and fund-raising breakdown makes interesting reading: booked seats and cash sales £459; seven Belgian flags £505; three Union Jacks £276; four sales of the wool bale £145; programmes and tiny flags sold by very smart little girls from the State schools £20; all the remaining flags and a few small item brought the total to £1485.

The Age on February 24 reported that the bale accompanied by its history would be forwarded to London and again auctioned for the Belgian Relief Fund. In addition Melba had consigned a bale of wool from Sydney, branded Gurrandan over GW over 18 for sale in London, this bale was presented to her by Mr G. Watson. During the week another donated bale was sold in Sydney for £500.

By early March, Melba had given seven concerts and had raised £7666 and the money raised at Geelong had increased to £1586. ⁽¹²⁾

Wool bale in London

It was some time before we learnt the fate of that historic bale of wool which had now raised £1168.

Sadly we don't know how much the bale sold for in London but we do know who bought it and what happened to it.

The Geelong Wool Brokers' Association forwarded the bale to London for re-sale. It was offered by Dalgety and Co through their brokers Messrs DuCroz, Doxat and Co on September 14, 1915. The final purchaser was H. Dawson and Co who generously undertook to have the wool made into khaki for the benefit and used of the Belgian Relief Fund.

Dalgety's obtained the co-operation of Isaac Holden and Sons Ltd, wool combers and Bradford and Learoyd Bros and Co. Ltd spinners and manufacturers, of Huddersfield. Holden and Sons combed the wool and Learoyd spun the yarn, wove the cloth and had it dyed. The blue cloth was about 140 yards long and 54 inches wide.

The Chief of His Majesty's Cabinet, General Headquarters of the Belgian Army wrote on May 30, 1917 that he had placed samples of the cloth before His Majesty the King of the Belgians who thanked everyone for what they had so generously done for the Belgian soldiers. The letter reprinted in the *Geelong Advertiser* went on:

“His Majesty is of the opinion that the beautiful cloth could be put to no better use than that of being made up into suits for wounded soldiers, who you must be aware, are deeply grateful for the many marks of kindness should to them by their Allied friends.”⁽¹³⁾

At the King's request Dawson and Co forwarded the cloth to the Queen of the Belgians care of Major E.M Mage, D.S.O. Folkstone, where it was made up into suits under the direction of the Relief Committee.⁽¹⁴⁾

The postcard

What has been puzzling was how the postcard without any information, came to be created and has not turned up in various public collections. It's possible no-one realised it was Melba in the photo standing beside some bales from a Mrs Petersen.

8 Ballangeich Wool Bale

That puzzle was soon solved. It appears that during her visit in Geelong Melba went into one of Geelong's wool stores and was photographed for the Geelong newspaper *News of the Week*. The photo was published in its edition of March 4, 1915. Afterwards, the newspaper agreed to produce 1000 postcards using the picture block and the sales would benefit the Belgian Relief Fund. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Annie Grace Gordon

Annie was the only daughter of Violette Elizabeth Eddington and George Gordon. Violette was born in 1848 at the family station "Ballangeich" which her father had established in July 1841.

Annie was born at the family property "Ellerslie", Toorak in 1878. She lived with her parents at "Ellerslie" and "Ballangeich" until her mother's death in 1932 when she bought part of "Ballangeich" and the



The Ballangeich and Ellerslie Red cross, Warrnambool Show, November 1917.

L to R: Miss Annie Gordon, Miss Mary Ormsby (Mrs A.C. Patison), Miss Isabel Cook, Mrs John Cook, Miss Emily Stratton, Miss Ellen Stratton, Mrs Daniel Stratton. (Courtesy Mortlake & District Historical Society)

“Ellerslie” estate in Toorak. She subdivided the latter but kept the house and part of the grounds. She died at Warrnambool in 1957. ⁽¹⁶⁾

During World War 1 Annie was treasurer of the Ballangeich and Ellerslie Red Cross Society. When the society faced a problem of lack of wool for knitting items for the troops, Annie found a solution – spin your own. She had previously learnt to spin so with the loan of four spinning wheels from various people around the district, women were taught spinning. Two members became so successful they entered a competition in Melbourne and won. Now with the wool available, the ladies could spin and knit for the soldiers. Annie even went to Terang to teach others how to spin their own yarns.

The society raised £781/16/4 for the war effort and that is not counting the funds raised from that historic bale of wool. ⁽¹⁷⁾

List of bale buyers

The first sale of the wool bale at Geelong Wool Exchange on December 17, 1914.

R. Short £105, Geo Kettlewell £52/10/-, I. Biggin £52/10/-; Fred Hill £52/10/-, P.H. Pearce and Son £52/10/-, Dewez Leonhard and Co. £42, Ronald Murray £36/15/-, W. Haughton and Co. £36/15/-, A.R. Lempriere £31/10/-, T. Irving £31/10/-, H. Dowling £26/5/-, Francis Willey and Co. £21, Ostermay Kreglinger and Co. £21, Whitehead and Co £15/15/-, F. Beckett £15/15/-, Fuhrmann Troost and Co £15/15/-, A. Cowie £21, W. Murray and Co £15/15/-, O.R. Flecker £10/10/-, Farnsworth, Stevenson and Co. £15/15/-, John Fox £10/10/-, Laycock and Co. £10/10/-. Total 693. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Buys at the second Geelong Wool Exchange auction February 18, 1915: William Moffatt, Berrambool £200; Thomas Millear, Edgarley, £50; William White, Mount Duneed, £10; Thomas Guthrie, Rich Avon and Avon Plains, Queensland, £20. ⁽¹⁹⁾

References

- (1) *Women of the Mount* by Florence Charles and Craige Proctor, Mortlake Historical Society.
- (2) *Ballarat Star* December 18, 1914 pg1.
- (3) *Willaura Farmer* December 18, 1914 pg 2.
- (4) *Sydney Morning Herald* January 29, 1915 pg 7.
- (5) *The Argus* February 8, 1915 pg 10.
- (6) *The Argus* February 19, 1915 pg 4.
- (17) *Ballangeich and Ellerslie: Bridging the Years* Robert McLaren, published 2012.
- (7) *The Age* February 24, 1915 pg 4.
- (8) *Geelong Advertiser* February 24, 1915 pg 3.
- (9) Op. cit..
- (10) Op. cit.
- (11) Op cit.
- (12) *The Age* March 6, 1915 pg 8.
- (13) *Geelong Advertiser* August 13, 1917 pg 5.
- (14) *Mortlake Dispatch* August 18, 1917 pg 2.
- (15) *Geelong Advertiser* March 1, 1915 pg 3.
- (16) *Women of the Mount*, op.cit.’
- (17) *Ballangeich and Ellerslie: Bridging the Years* Robert McLaren, published 2012.
- (18) *Willuara Farmer* December 18, 1914, pg2.
- (19) *Hamilton Spectator* February 23, 1915 pg 4.

The Lilydale & District Historical Society archive has copies of all newspaper articles in its files. If you have any photographs or articles about the wool bale, please email the society :

info@lilydalehistorical.com.au

Copies of this booklet will be available on the society's website:

www.lilydalehistorical.com.au

and the Nellie Melba Museum virtual website at:

www.nelliemelbamuseum.com.au

12 Ballangeich Wool Bale