

ALFRED RONALDS (1802-1860)

THE FOUNDER OF THE AUSTRALIAN BRANCH OF THE FAMILY

Excerpt from
The Ronalds Family of Australia (1985)
by
A. F. Ronalds

Alfred, born on 10th July, 1802, was the eleventh of twelve children of Francis Ronalds (1761-1806) and a brother of Sir Francis Ronalds (1788-1873). The family home was at 1 Highbury Terrace, in the London suburb of Highbury.

When Alfred was only four years of age his father died leaving his mother with seven of her children under thirteen years of age. However, it is apparent from the recorded facts of his life that he must have received a fairly good education.

During his latter school years he took an interest in the electrical experiments being carried out by his eldest brother, Francis, and gave him some assistance in erecting his experimental telegraphic equipment.

During the 1820's Alfred became highly skilled as an engraver, lithographer and copper plate printer - presumably stemming from an apprenticeship commencing about 1817 and brought to fruition by perseverance and a flair for such arts. He also acquired some ability as a surveyor.

However, somewhere about 1830 he broadened his interests, moved to Staffordshire, became a keen angler and commenced a very thorough study of trout and grayling, including their senses of hearing, sight, taste and smell and, in particular, their feeding habits and the types of insects they ate at various times of the year. As an aid to this study he built a fishing hut, or observatory, overhanging a part of the Blythe River (near Uttoxeter) which offered concealment for close observation of the fish in the river.

On 11th April, 1831, at Tixall, Staffordshire, he married Margaret Bond a young lady from the nearby village of Draycotts. This marriage produced eight children:-

Maria Barbara	-	(1832-1884)
Alfred	-	died in infancy
Francis	-	(1836-1907)
Nathaniel	-	(1840-1898)
Charles Chester	-	(1841-1914)
John	-	(1842-1906)
Margaret Jane	-	(1846-1890)
Hugh	-	(1847-1927)

Following his study of the habits of fish he carried out many experiments on the making of artificial flies, imitating the various insects eaten by the fish, and then wrote a book entitled "THE FLY-FISHER'S ENTOMOLOGY", first published in 1836.

The book, comprising over one hundred pages, contains a detailed description of the art of fly fishing and of the manner of making about fifty artificial flies each imitating a different insect. It also has twenty plates showing a total of about one hundred exquisite illustrations of insects, artificial flies, etc.

The preface of the first edition begins with the following paragraphs:-

“The author of this little work entreats that it may be considered and judged of as a labour, or rather the amusement of an amateur; whose chief object has been to facilitate to the tyro in the art, the making and choice of artificial flies, on a plan of elucidation derived from personal experience.

Having himself sorely felt the inadequacy of mere verbal instructions to enable him to imitate the natural fly correctly, or even approximately, and the little utility of graphical illustrations unaccompanied by the principal requisite, viz. colour, he has been induced to paint both the natural and artificial fly from nature, to etch them with his own hand, and to colour, or superintend the colouring of each particular impression”

The plates are an excellent example of Alfred’s skill as an engraver, and the hand coloring was necessary because there was no color printing in those days.

In 1963 I managed to acquire, through an antique bookshop, a copy of the second edition of the book, published in 1839. Further editions were published in 1844, 1849, 1856, 1862, 1868, 1877, 1883, 1901, 1913 and 1921. Copies of early editions which have been in the family for a long time and which were no doubt originally in Alfred’s possession are now held by Roy Techow and Dorothy Gillman.

The eleventh edition, in 1913, was an “Edition de Luxe” in two volumes; Volume 2 consisting of forty-eight actual artificial flies, in addition to the engraved representations in Volume 1. Volume 1 also contains a brief description of Alfred’s life (from which some of this story was obtained) and a silhouette of Alfred supplied to the publishers by his nephew, J. C. Carter.

There is a copy of the 1913 edition in the State Library of Victoria. The “Publisher’s Note” contains the following sentence:-

The publishers do not consider that an apology is needed for issuing a handsome edition of the work which, for more than three-quarters of a century, has been regarded as the best practical treatise on this subject, and which has won for itself the right to be called a classic.

“The Fishing Gazette” (London) of 20th December, 1913, published a review of this edition together with a photograph of Alfred taken from a painting. The photo was supplied to the publishers by a Charles Taylor, Secretary of the Acclimatization Society of Ballarat, who had obtained it from Alfred’s son, Charles Chester Ronalds. A copy of this issue of the Gazette is held by Ruth Edgar. The origin of this painting is unknown, and no evidence has been found of it being still in existence.

Whereas Alfred commenced the study largely as a hobby, his decision to write the book may well have been influenced by Sir Francis’ various publications on electricity and a comprehensive treatise on apples written by his uncle, Hugh Ronalds and published in 1831.

Following their marriage Alfred and Margaret established a home at Leafields in Staffordshire where they remained until about 1843. For the first five years of this period of about twelve years he must have spent most of his time deriving the detailed information included in the first edition of his book, writing it up and preparing the plates. Thereafter he presumably combined the further work for the second edition with farming, as in 1840 he classified himself as a farmer.

By 1844 they had moved to Dolgelly in North Wales where Alfred was occupied for at least part of his time making and selling artificial flies. By 1846 they had moved to Brecon in South Wales and in 1847 they were at Cwmbach, Llanellwedd, Wales, where Alfred classified himself as a fishing tackle maker.

On 27th August, 1847, two months after the birth of Hugh, Margaret died at Cwmbach, aged 33.

In 1848, Alfred emigrated to Australia with six of his seven children ranging in age from fifteen to two; the care of Hugh having been taken over by relatives in England, apparently the Bonds.

They sailed from London in the “Lord Hungerford” on 9th November and arrived at Williamstown on 10th February, 1849. The ship was of 736 tons and had 179 passengers including many children. In announcing its arrival, “The Argus” newspaper of 13th February, reported that:-

The arrival of this ship was anxiously looked for, as being the first trial of the mutual co-operation principle, the passengers all coming out on a level (without the customary distinctions of cabins, intermediate, and steerage) and at a uniform price. So far as the Lord Hungerford is concerned, we are happy to learn that the experiment has succeeded to admiration, but it is only justice to Captain Paterson to say that this success is attributed by the passengers mainly to his extreme urbanity and kind attention to all on board, and some even go so far as to say that with a different Captain the attempt would have been a failure. The passengers are of a very superior class, some of them being men of substance, and a considerable number ranking as small capitalists; there are also a number of superior tradesmen and a few of that unfortunately most overlooked class, mercantile clerks. There were three deaths on board. The voyage passed off pleasantly, the passengers among other amusements resorting to the publication of manuscript newspapers. -----The surgeon and other officers of the ship came in for a share of the high eulogiums which the passengers heap upon Captain Paterson, and it is really a credit to all concerned that the voyage has terminated so agreeably.

It is of some interest to recall that in 1849 the area later proclaimed the State of Victoria was still part of the colony of New South Wales. Melbourne had a population of only 17,000 and barely fourteen years had elapsed since the first building (a hut) was erected on the site of this future capital of Victoria. In 1849, as recorded in the diary of the wife of the first Anglican Bishop of Melbourne (Rt. Rev. Charles Perry D.D.):-

- (a) Brighton was a straggling village, the nine mile road to which was a sandy track full of tree stumps and winding through country thickly strewn with gum trees and wattle,
- (b) Heidelberg (eight miles east of Melbourne) was the “most settled part of the surrounding country”. It contained a butcher, a baker, a wheelwright, a blacksmith and a “considerable number of settlers scattered around within some six to eight miles”.

In 1849 there was no vehicular track to Gippsland although one or two bullock drawn drays had managed to negotiate the pack track that led from the Dandenong Hills via crude wayside inns at “Burra Burnip”, “Shady Creek” and “Mowie” to Port Albert and other early settlements of East Gippsland. On the other hand, Geelong had a population of over 4,000 people and was reported to be “growing rapidly”.

On disembarking Alfred proceeded with his children to Geelong. There is no evidence as to why Alfred emigrated to Australia or why he chose Geelong; one can only surmise. However it seems a reasonable assumption that, to bring his young family half way around the world to Geelong in those early days, he knew someone in Geelong and felt reasonably assured that he could make a living and care for his children there. At that time it was also a more congenial town for a young family than Melbourne.

On arrival in Geelong, Alfred set himself up in business. The following is the main part of one of his typical advertisements in the Geelong “Advertiser”

ALFRED RONALDS

Draftsman, Engraver and Copper Plate Printer

Having brought with him from England the complete apparatus for carrying on the above business, is now ready to receive orders for Cards, Maps, Cheques, Circulars and all other descriptions of Copper-plate engraving and printing, which he will execute with neatness and accuracy, and at prices which will be found reasonable.

The advertisement of 26th March, 1849 (seven weeks after his arrival) included:- "Present residence, Mr. Dean's, at the corner of Marrabool Street and Market Square". The advertisement of 4th December, 1849 said:- "Orders received by Mr. Paterson, watchmaker, Kardinia Street or at Mr. Ronalds' residence, Little Scotland, facing the Town Reserve at the corner of the Great Western Road". This residence was on the north-west corner of the streets now named Aberdeen Street and Latrobe Terrace.

I have a copper plate engraved:-

ALFRED RONALDS
ENGRAVER
Copper Plate Printer and
LITHOGRAPHER
Corio Street East
GEELONG

The wording is between fluted columns and two sailing ships, and is surmounted by the British Coat of Arms.

Other members of the family are in possession of other examples of his copper engraving, including plates used for printing billheads, cheques, etc. for various firms in Geelong.

On 19th November, 1849, at Christ Church, Geelong, Alfred married Mary Ann Harlow - a spinster of thirty-two years of age who came to Australia with her aunt on the same ship as Alfred and his children. This marriage produced four more children, Alexander (1850-1938), Mary (1853-1905), Eliza (1855-1909) and Julia (1858-1905).

Lithographic work at the time Alfred was in business in Geelong involved the use of polished stone slabs and, during his searches for suitable stone for his purpose, Alfred found a marble deposit at Limeburner's Point, at the east end of the Botanical Gardens - shown on present day maps of Geelong as Point Galena. Alfred considered that the marble had commercial value and, on meeting Governor La Trobe during one of the latter's visits to Geelong, he showed him samples of marble stone that he had polished, and the site of the marble deposit. Governor La Trobe complimented Alfred for his industry but said that the colony was far too young to set up as an exporter of marble and that the "wooden houses of the colony would not look well with marble chimney pieces". It is obvious that Alfred over-estimated the value of the marble deposit.

In 1850 Alfred again demonstrated his artistic skill by designing and striking a 2-inch diameter medal "Commemorative of the Great Charter of Self Government Granted to the Colony of Victoria, August, 5th 1850". On the obverse face of the medal the above wording is surmounted by a wreath of rose, thistle and shamrock (the national emblems of England, Scotland and Ireland), divided at the top by a Crown.

The reverse face is divided by lines into four quadrants with a sun at the intersection of the lines. There is a symbol, with motto, in each quadrant. The following explanation of the symbols is taken from the back of one of Alfred's printed business cards of that time:-

- 1st quadrant - The Bird - with the Crown pendant - is made to represent New South Wales as a mother country, dropping the boon of Self-Government into the open mouths of the young colony of Victoria. "Maternal Affection".
- 2nd quadrant - The Butterfly - leaving its chrysalis - is symbolic of the birth of the new colony, Victoria, leaving its husk behind and fleeing to partake of the sweets of a new generation. "Adieu".
- 3rd quadrant - The Bird - escaping from its cage - represents Victoria escaping from the bonds of control, with all the vicissitudes of life, soaring on the wings of liberty into the expanse of Nations. "How sweet is Liberty".
- 4th quadrant - The Hands - clasped across the waters - show that although the waters of the Murray River divide us, the hearts of the people are united. "Separate but still united".
- Centre - The Sun in the centre, which is the Geelong Crest, is seen to shine alike on Maternal Affection, The Birth of a New Colony, Liberty and the United Hearts of the People.

The medal is described in the "Argus" of 13th December, 1850, and in "The Victorian Historical Magazine" Volume 11, 1912, published by the Historical Society of Victoria. An engraving of both faces of the medal was printed in the "Australasian" of 10th December, 1898. Another article on the medal appears in Vol.15 No.3 of the Australian Numismatic Journal, published in 1965, well over one hundred years after the medal was struck.

Press reports establish that the medal was not sponsored by the Government. It was obviously a private venture no doubt motivated by a combination of patriotism and commercial gain.

The museum of Victoria has one of the medals. Ernest Ronalds has one and, in 1913, Alfred's son Alexander had seven, one of which is now held by his daughter Eileen McFarlane.

Persons with a mature appreciation of art would be able to read from this medal much of Alfred's character. To me, the production of the medal indicates considerable initiative. The design confirms his interest in, and detailed knowledge of, nature and, I believe, depicts a man in a peaceful and contented frame of mind with faith in the future of his new country.

The medal gave Alfred the distinction of being the first to have designed and engraved a medal in Australia. He was also the earliest copper-plate engraver and printer in Victoria.

In the "List of Burgesses" (Citizens) published in the Geelong "Advertiser" on 8th December, 1849, Alfred's name appears under Villamanta Ward. The 1851 Victorian Directory lists Alfred as "engraver, lithographer, copper plate printer and surveyor, office Moorabool Street, Geelong, residence New Town". It appears that his business address was in turn Corio Street East, Malop Street (opposite Haymarket) and Moorabool Street. The reasons for the changes are unknown.

Alfred carried on his business in Geelong from early 1849 until late 1851 when, like very many other Victorians, he joined the gold rush which followed the first discovery of gold in August, 1851.

Immediately before doing so he made detailed drawings of a gold-washing machine for inclusion in a treatise by Ure and Herbert on a "Patent Washing Machine for Economising Labour" - published in late 1851. I have a copy of these drawings which were printed by lithography.

Knowledge of his gold-seeking activities, which extended over about fifteen, months, is largely confined to that set out in his obituary in a Ballarat paper which is quoted below. It is understood, however, that he was the first to sink a shaft at Black Hill, which subsequently proved to be one of the rich Ballarat fields. Nevertheless, as illustrated by his frequent movements from one field to another

and the limited period he spent on the goldfields, this occupation was not a prosperous venture for him. Late in 1852 or early 1853 he moved his family from Geelong to Ballarat, established a home in Exeter Street, and resumed his business of copper-plate printing combined with surveying some of the streets of Ballarat, providing water for part of the town by means of two large tanks which he filled from Lake Wendouree with a small engine-driven pump and assisted in building the first hospital in Ballarat. In 1854 he purchased a six and a half acre block of bush land on the south-east corner of Macarthur Street and Wendouree Parade, the southern boundary of which was Gnarr Creek - an outlet from Lake Wendouree, now a piped drain. On this land he established a market garden with a wide variety of vegetables and flowers. At the Ballarat Horticultural Society Show on 9th and 10th March, 1860, he won prizes for grapes (3 varieties), peaches, cucumbers, apples (2 varieties), pumpkins, marrows, celery, red beet, leeks, peas, beans and parsley, including six firsts and seven seconds.

He also experimented with more exotic plants including cloves, pepper, coffee, chicory, tobacco, cotton, flax, tea, caraway seed, the castor oil plant and the ink plant – the berries of which when steeped in hot water and strained made a good ink - and was successful with most of them.

He also supplied a large number of plants for the initial planting of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens and for some years thereafter kept up a regular donation of further plants.

In 1858 he sold his printing equipment which, by that time, was obsolescent. Alfred died suddenly of a stroke at Ballarat on 23rd April, 1860, aged fifty-eight years, and was buried in the cemetery at the corner of Macarthur Street and Creswick Road. His grave is approximately fifty-five yards west of the Eureka Monument and can be readily identified by its horizontal marble stone.

The following report in “The Miner and Weekly Star” of 4th May, 1860, (a Ballarat paper of the time) gives a concise record of his movements and activities for the last nine of his twelve years in Australia:-

“The Creswick Advertiser says of the late Mr. Ronalds, whose death we recorded a few days ago, that he was an old resident of the gold fields having lived under the Adelaide Hill, Forest Creek, in December, 1851, whence he removed to Eagle Hawk in 1852, and thence to Bendigo itself. He subsequently became a resident of Creswick, and settled down on Ballarat in 1853. The deceased was the first to start the surfacing west of and near to the Ballarat Cemetery, with which he persevered until a rush surrounded him, depriving him of some really good ground, almost within his grasp. Mr. Ronalds shortly after purchased the land for that nursery which he cultivated with so much taste and skill, and the produce of which met with encomiums at the recent Ballarat Show. The deceased gentleman possessed considerable and varied talent, combined with indomitable perseverance. As a proof, he was a self-taught engraver, copper-plate printer, medallist and lithographer. As an ardent lover of his adopted country, and conceiving that the separation of Victoria from New South Wales deserved some permanent record, he designed and struck a medal commemorative of the event. One of the medals is now in our possession. But the people of Geelong were not so enthusiastic as the artist, and used to say that he gave away nineteen medals in order to sell the twentieth. In the old country, Mr. Ronalds was an ardent follower of Izaak Walton. His work on Fly Fishing (published by Longman and Co.) still maintains its ground, and for some years the profits from its sale, he said, averaged fifty pound per annum. Lucky author! The deceased gentleman, who was twice married, has left a large family to deplore their loss. Mr. Ronalds was closely related to the celebrated Martineau family.”

The following information will help to clarify the above obituary:-

- (a) “Forest Creek” has long since been renamed Castlemaine.
- (b) Izaak Walton (1593-1683) was an English writer and particularly famous as the author of “The Complete Angler or The Contemplative Man’s Recreation”

- (c) Dr. James Martineau (1805-1900) was the most prominent Unitarian minister of his time and a writer of great power. From 1868-1885 he was Principal of Manchester New College, and during that period wrote the greater part of his remarkable essays, all of which were of a profound spiritual character and possessed much literary charm. Alfred's close relationship with the Martineau family was apparently through his sister, Mary Ann who married a Peter Martineau (1786-1869).

There seems to be little doubt that Alfred knew and was influenced by Dr. James Martineau because correspondence in the "Ballarat Star" immediately following Alfred's death establishes that Alfred was himself a Unitarian. The correspondence arose from the burial service being conducted by an Anglican minister - there being no Unitarian minister in Ballarat at the time.

Alfred's wife, Mary, was left with four children aged between ten and two. She and some of Alfred's older sons carried on the market garden for a time and at the Horticultural Society Show on 23rd November, 1860 they won prizes for roses, gladioli, strawberries, peas, beans, culinary herbs, parsley and asparagus, comprising five firsts and three seconds.

Mary lived on in Ballarat with her daughters until at least 1875, then moved to Melbourne where for some time she conducted an antique furniture shop in St. Kilda. She died in Melbourne in 1895 at the age of seventy-eight.

In his relatively short life of fifty-eight years Alfred had been a draftsman, engraver, copper-plate printer, lithographer, surveyor, researcher, author, fishing tackle maker, gold seeker, nurseryman and market gardener, as well as being twice married and the father of twelve children.

He was obviously a very intelligent person who applied himself meticulously to all his ventures - in almost all of which he was highly successful. He also coped extremely well with his transition from England to the entirely different environment he encountered in Australia.

These known facts of his life establish that he was quite a remarkable man.

It is of some interest to recall that:

- Alfred and his family were living in Ballarat at the time of the historic Eureka Stockade on 3rd December, 1854.
- his death occurred four months before Burke and Wills set out from Melbourne on their ill-fated exploration of the hinterland of the Australian continent.