



# GEORGE'S DIARY

GEORGE WEBB of MISSION BEACH



ABRIDGED VERSION

BY KEN GRAY

George Webb of Mission Beach was a farmer and a soldier; a man of few words who was actively involved in three major wars, the Boer War in South Africa in 1902, WWI in France in 1916 - 1917 and in WWII with the Citizen Military Force in Victoria, 1942 - 1943.

He chose to live well away from the hurly burly of life in cities and wars for much of his life, preferring the tropics. He lived in Mission Beach for 26 years from 1913 to 1939 with part of that time spent in France during WWI.

George was born at Condowie in South Australia 7 August 1882, and his family moved to Benalla in Victoria soon after where they purchased a farm. That is where George was living when he enlisted for the Boer War in 1901. By the time he reached South Africa the war had ended, and he returned in 1902. He enlisted for WWI when living at Mission Beach on 14 February 1916, serving in the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion and became a Provisional Sergeant. He was fighting in the Somme when discharged with pleurisy on 01 January 1918 and was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

In 1925, he married Lilian Hopkins, when he was 42 years of age and she was 39. Lilian's father, Thomas Hollis Hopkins (1839 – 1919), married Ann McTaggart (1847 – 1901). Hollis had nine children, five sons and four daughters. Lilian is listed as a half-sister to Spenser McTaggart Hopkins, the first born child who was most well-known.

George and Lilian had a daughter, Elizabeth in 1926. There was no school in Mission Beach apart from a tiny hut built by the Dunlop's in 1934 for their three children. Elizabeth joined them for a while. In 1935, Lilian took Elizabeth to England for her education. They did not return until 1944 when George was back in Benalla. Elizabeth was killed in a tragic horse riding incident in 1947, when she hit her head on a tree branch. After the loss of 20-year-old Elizabeth, Lilian returned to England and remained there until she died aged 97 years at Winchester.

George tried his hand at many different jobs before he joined the Queensland Police Force in 1913. He was transferred to Ingham and while there he selected 292 acres of land at Mission Beach. He moved there 17 September 1914, after resigning from the Police Force.

Immediately to the south of this property was the large land holding (over 3,000 acres) of the state-owned Hull River Aboriginal Settlement. George was there the day after the 1918 cyclone hit and killed the Superintendent John Kenny and his daughter Kathleen and at least three Aboriginal people living in custody there. His neighbour to the south of that was Hollis Hopkins of Townsville, Lilian's father. He was a wealthy mercer and stock and station agent, but Hollis did not live on the land. He selected 1,280 acres in July 1882 and somehow managed to retain it, despite strict laws on selected land that required the owners to reside on and work the land within a short time after selection. Hollis' son, Spenser Hopkins, purchased the freehold land on Dunk Island from Edmund Banfield's wife Bertha in 1933.

George could see Dunk Island from his home on the mainland which was located at the southern end of what is known as Wongaling Beach today.

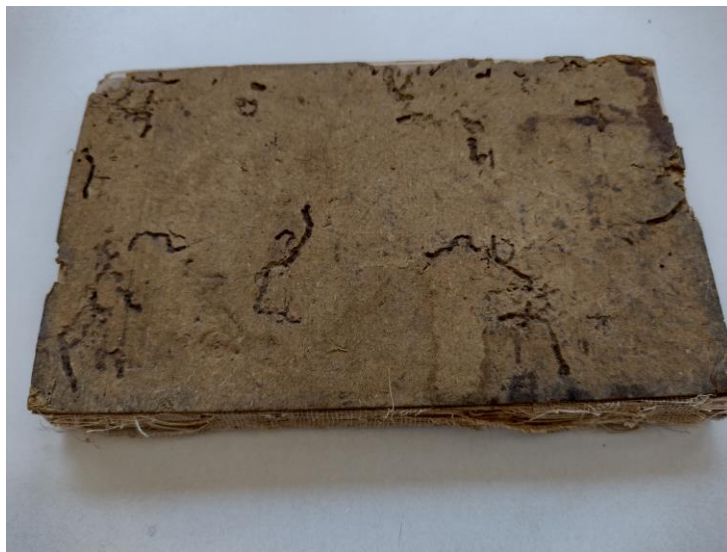
Lilian Hopkins was a regular Dunk Island visitor and a companion of Bertha Banfield who was close to her half-brother Spenser Hopkins as well. It was there that George met Lilian. The Webbs

called their land and home *Koongul*. The land had 20 acres cleared with coconuts, mangoes, fruit trees and small crops, and they had 100 goats by 1939.

George went to Benalla in 1939 after selling the farm to Alfred Wheatley. Late in life he came to Cardwell for a short time (1953) and purchased a lot. He went to Charters Towers for the last few months of his life but returned to Victoria before he died 26 May 1955.

George Webb's diaries have expanded our understanding of who he was and who lived here at the time (in 1918 then 1935 to 1937). Webb Street near the school was named after him.

When I was given a couple of old diaries by the Wheatley family to see if they would shed some light on our district's history, I held out little hope of it being fruitful. This was what the first one looked like after it had lived among some hungry termites:



1937 Diary of George Webb. Courtesy of the Wheatley family.

When I nervously opened the cover, it looked quite promising. No termite or water damage. This diary was written in 1937 and from research previously conducted for the book, *War and Beach*, a test would be to examine entries for July when Australia's most notable WWII warship, HMAS *Australia II* visited Dunk Island. I carefully flipped the pages to July 21 hoping George would have seen this incredible event. There it was ... history written legibly on the day it had happened! I scrambled to find other known visit dates for RAN cruisers and destroyers and found them also accurately recorded by George. Early visits by the cruiser HMAS *Canberra* and destroyer D22, HMAS *Waterben* are also confirmed in the diaries. This was gold.

Next was a less formal diary for 1935 and 1936 in a small notebook. That looked like a write-off. It contained diary entries from 14 May 1935 to 03 February 1936. It was a little more difficult to decipher. I soon saw that this was a valuable record. In the 1935-36 diary, George recorded shopping lists. They are very different to any modern supermarket shopping lists.

Later, I was given some notes that were written by Sheena McEachan in September 2000. These were transcriptions and Sheena had access to a partial 1918 diary. 10 March 1918, George merely entered the words, *Terrible cyclone*. The description of George as, *a man of few words* was apt. That is the most severe cyclone to have crossed the Queensland coast near to a large population in European recorded history.

Constance Mackness spoke of the way that George Webb obtained his mail. Until Edmund Banfield's death, he rowed to Dunk weekly for the mail and after that he went to Narragon. This is confirmed in the diaries. In the Commonwealth electoral rolls from 1928 on, George and Lilian listed their address as Narragon Beach (Mackness' home where they collected the mail) whereas earlier they had their address as *Koongul* via Dunk Island.

In all, the diaries cover 90 weeks' of George Webb's life. The diary entries were analysed and weather was the most common topic cited. The entries were very brief. Visits by boats and visitors to or from George were next most common, followed by farm, home and garden events. Planes were often mentioned, sometimes landing on the beach. George often recorded the status of the electric lights on Dunk Island, driven by Hugo Brassey's generators.

Three days a week, George met with other settlers or visitors, often for tea or dinner. He enjoyed the company of others and sought these frequent interactions actively. The people he most often met and socialised were 'Old Smith' who was also known as 'Gunboat Smith' who was squatting in a tin shed on land near to the Big Cassowary statue site of today at Wongaling Beach.

Some notable people, Alex Dunlop, Peter White and Len Mackness regularly met George and he had many friends he visited in El Arish and Tully as well as at Mission Beach. He travelled widely, north to Bingil Bay and south to as far as the Hull River to see friends.

He met with most the people known to live in the area at the time. One not mentioned in the diaries is Edmond Frizelle, the Irish butterfly collector who lived in Garners Beach and was educated at Oxford University, and George did not go to the Garners' place to visit and only mentions them briefly. He mentions Banfield only once yet knew the Banfields well and went to Dunk before 1923 to obtain mail and supplies every week.

In her book, *Cardwell Shire Story*, Dorothy Jones tells of a returned soldier, Sydney Woodfield Harris who died in a fire while clearing his land in November 1921. George was one of a team of four with Banfield, Beaman and Fenby, who created a cairn where Sydney Harris was buried.

George shot nearly everything that moved on his land and usually ate it. Pigeons, wallabies, bush chooks, you name it, they were on the menu. He loved small birds and often mentions sunbirds.

He was an accomplished cook and often baked bread, biscuits and cakes and cooked a wide variety of meals using many ingredients. He was not simply a meat and veg man. He grew fruit such as pineapples, mangos and bananas and provided that to locals but was not sending fruit off to external markets by this time. He won a pension in 1937 to augment his income.

George was ever curious about Dunk Island happenings and this was the time when Hugo Brassey owned most of the leasehold land on the island. He knew Hugo and his wife Christa, a Baroness from Germany, but he did not know them well. George visited the local surveyors camp frequently when they were building the road to Tully and heard the explosions as they cut through the rock.

This was quite a sad life, being so many years without his wife and losing his only child as a teenager. His years in the wars no doubt added to that sadness yet George Webb, while taciturn,

was quite outgoing and was a notable character in the small district of Mission Beach and knew most the people who lived here.

The southern part of the district was settled later than the northern parts like Mission Beach and Bingil Bay and George was one of the earliest to settle in the south. There was a large gap between George's land and the Hull River where four or five settlers created farms early on, but George had neighbours immediately to the north of his land and for a short period had the Hull River Aboriginal Settlement next door on the south side. He sometimes went to Dunk Island as well so was no means without friends.

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This is an abridged version of *George's Diary*. The full story with references is available on our web page as H024, also named *George's Diary*.

Cover images are the Victory Medal (top), the Australian Hat Badge as worn by George in the Boer War and WWI and a depiction of the Victoria Mounted Rifles he joined up with for the Boer War in 1902 (bottom left).