

Political Journalist Joe Alexander: Establishing Canberra's Heritage — Parliament, Diplomacy and Life in Suburbia

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Establishing the history and heritage of Parliament: PRESS GALLERY 1934

At the beginning of 1929 a Melbourne journalist, Joe Alexander, arrived in the National Capital to report federal parliament for Keith Murdoch's powerful Melbourne daily, *The Herald*, plus other newspapers in the group. During the next 15 years he was credited with setting in motion forces that 'changed governments' and made and unmade prime ministers.¹ He was described as 'the prince of the Press Gallery'.²

His standing as a political journalist, his powerful influence and his reporting of the political dramas of the 1930s and early 1940s played a vital role in establishing Canberra as the National Capital in the minds of the Australian people. His reporting cemented the fact that Canberra was the place where parliament sat, where governments rose and fell, where war was declared and where interaction with other countries took place; not Melbourne which had been the de facto capital from Federation to 1927.

Joseph Aloysius Alexander was born in Melbourne in 1892, spent his childhood in Tasmania and left school at 15. He began work as a copy boy on the *Burnie Advocate*, worked as a journalist on the Launceston *Examiner* and, in 1923, was appointed senior reporter on the Melbourne *Evening Sun*.³ Two years later, when the Herald & Weekly Times took over the *Evening Sun*, Murdoch made Alexander the Federal correspondent in Melbourne for the *Sun-News Pictorial* and the two began an association that lasted until Murdoch's death.⁴ When he moved to Canberra for the *Herald*, Alexander was regarded as 'Murdoch's listening post and occasional assassin'.⁵

In 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, when the Labor Prime Minister, Jim Scullin, was in London attempting to solve the country's overseas debt crisis, Alexander obtained copies of cables he sent back to his ministers disclosing a caucus in chaos. The publication of the cables became known as the 'leaked cables affair'. When Alexander refused to name the source of the leak, he was expelled from the House of Representatives Chamber, but not the Senate, where the Opposition had a majority.⁶

During his expulsion, Alexander was often seen wandering along an imaginary line running down the middle of King's Hall, waving at members on the House side indicating he wanted to talk to them. Alexander's expulsion from the House, and not the Senate, remains a unique event in the history of the Federal Parliament as is the imaginary line story. They are part of the heritage of Old Parliament House.

When the Labor Party was swept from power and Joe Lyons became Prime Minister, Alexander wrote in his diary: 'Everyone is saying in Canberra that I have put Lyons in as Prime Minister. It is more than half true.'

Alexander was involved in another unique event in Old Parliament House. After seeing teleprinters operating in Canada, while reporting the 1932 Imperial Economic Conference, he persuaded Murdoch to set up a teleprinter service linking Parliament House in Canberra with the *Herald* in Melbourne. On 8 May 1934, Alexander 'made newspaper history', sending the first ever teleprinter message to a newspaper office in Australia.⁷

His influence continued during the fall of Menzies and Fadden and the wartime Labor Curtin Government. Early in 1942, when Curtin made his historic 'without pangs' appeal to the United States for help against possible Japanese invasion, he gave his speech to Alexander for first publication in the Melbourne *Herald*. Alexander became an ardent admirer of John Curtin as a wartime leader

and one of the small group of senior journalists, known as Curtin's 'press circus', whom he briefed twice a day with secret, background information.⁸

Politics in the suburbs

Behind Alexander's role as a journalist was a citizen becoming part of Canberra's developing suburbia. When he arrived in Canberra with his wife, he was provided with a company house at 8 Macquarie St Barton and he also had a gift of £500 from Murdoch to furnish the house.⁹

Appointment to Canberra as head of bureau was a prized job with a good salary, an expense allowance and 'perks', such as membership of the Commonwealth Club, a meeting place for senior public servants. Alexander made 8 Macquarie St a place of political intrigue. Soon after he was elected Prime Minister, Joe Lyons made his first prime ministerial visit to a private home to Macquarie St. He and Alexander talked for 2½ hours.¹⁰



Establishing suburbia: 28 MUGGA WAY

By 1935, Alexander's hope that Murdoch would reward him with a posting to London had vanished. Resigned to staying in Canberra, he decided to build a house on Canberra's premier street. As a first step, he paid Billy Hughes £100

for the transfer of Hughes's lease of Lot 11 [No. 28], Mugga Way, Red Hill. On 26 February 1936, Hughes acknowledged receipt in a flowery letter held by the Canberra & District Historical Society. Hughes wrote that he hoped that when Alexander and his wife were 'in the garden drenched with lovely blooms & piquant odours drinking in the scene of beauty which spreads on every hand', they might find 'some added flavour of romance' in remembering that Hughes had intended to build on the block.¹¹

The Alexanders built a 26-square house they named 'Glenfinnin' and, like many other Canberra residents, they planted fruit trees, shrubs and flowers and became part of the neighbourhood community. Sir Harold White, who lived across the road, described them as 'perfect neighbours, always mindful of our welfare and as generous with their friendship as with the fruits and blossoms of their glorious garden'.¹² The Alexander house in Mugga Way is now the home of the Carmelite Order of nuns.

Alexander's diaries

The diaries Alexander kept have become part of Canberra's heritage, preserved in the National Library's Manuscript Collection, where they are a great resource for historians researching politics and personalities during the governments of Bruce-Page, Scullin, Lyons, Menzies, Fadden and Curtin. They're also a valuable record of the Alexanders' daily life in Canberra and their interaction with others. Each day of his life at Macquarie Street and Mugga Way, Alexander filled a foolscap page with handwritten notes. He also followed a pattern of summing up his career, marriage, finances and future expectations on the first and last days of the year. These were usually written at Jervis Bay, where the Alexanders spent a few weeks over the Christmas break, placing them among the pioneers of another Canberra custom of holidays at the coast.



Establishing diplomacy: ALEXANDER IN MOSCOW

Wartime Envoy in Moscow

Alexander had been an enthusiastic follower of Russian politics since the 1917 revolution. He became disillusioned in the 1930s with the descent into terror under Stalin, but his interest revived with the resistance to Hitler in World War II and the deeds of the Red Army.¹³ He spent years studying Russian and was hopeful his expertise in the language would lead to a posting to Moscow.¹⁴

Early in 1944, at Curtin's instigation, he was appointed First Secretary at the Australian Legation in Moscow at a time when Australia had very few diplomatic representatives overseas and only a few career diplomats. At the start

of World War II, only the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States were represented in Canberra and it was 1943 before they were followed by Soviet Russia and Nationalist China.

A plan to send the Alexanders to Russia by a US naval ship was abandoned because of the danger of Japanese attack with the possibility of Alexander, presumably a highly prized target, being taken prisoner.¹⁵ After a long delay in America, they travelled by air from Seattle to the Yukon, through Alaska, then on the route flown by Lend Lease planes making many stops in Siberia and Russia. The story of their hazardous wartime flight is told in Alexander's book *In the Shadow: Three Years in Moscow*,¹⁶ and in diaries he sent back to Australia in unbound bundles, now in the National Library.¹⁷

Alexander admired the Soviet war effort, Russian culture and the stoicism of the people in a war that cost the USSR over 20 million casualties. But he became a fierce critic of the Communist system of government, particularly its treatment of ordinary workers and those of Orthodox faith who practised their religion despite its being officially despised and ridiculed and its adherents economically disadvantaged.¹⁸

He particularly noted the absence of any acknowledgement in the Russian media of any mention of Allied help: there was no mention of the bravery of British sailors evading German submarines to bring supplies of raw materials to the Arctic ports, or the vast amount of aid sent from America under lend lease. There was also no mention of Australia's community effort, 'Sheepskins for Russia', promoted by Jessie Street.¹⁹

Who's Who in Australia

Back in Australia, Alexander resumed work with the Herald & Weekly Times in Melbourne as editor of the highly praised *Who's Who in Australia*, adding the 1950 and 1955 editions to those he had edited before going to Moscow. When he retired in 1957 and moved back to Canberra to live, he was asked to continue editing *Who's Who*. He edited three more editions before retiring.²⁰ The *Canberra Times*' columnist 'Gang Gang' marked Alexander's departure with a tribute to his diligence, noting that few people ever made it into *Who's Who*, who later 'blotted their copybooks'.²¹ *Who's Who* is another example of Alexander's contribution to history and heritage.



Conserving history and heritage: ALEXANDER ROOM

Association with CDHS

In 1958, Joe Alexander and his wife joined the Canberra & District Historical Society. Although he was not active as an office bearer or in giving papers, members of the Society remained their friends after the Alexanders moved to Queensland. Early in 1979, Alexander told a member of the Society's Council, Pat Wardle, that he and his wife wished to show gratitude for the happiness they had enjoyed in Canberra by establishing a permanent fund for the Canberra & District Historical Society with an initial donation of \$3000. After it had received further substantial donations, the Society named its research library the Alexander Room on 28 October 1980.

Following the deaths of Joe Alexander in 1983 and his wife in 1991, the Society received a bequest of \$20,000, plus a proportion of the residue of Kath Alexander's estate bring the Alexander Fund to about \$50,000. As this was not sufficient to buy premises, and facing increasing financial problems, the Society used the Fund towards paying the rent on its premises and removal expenses during three forced moves. The Fund, which was exhausted by 2016, enabled the Society to continue its work of housing, preserving and publicising its valuable collection of historical items.



Architectural heritage: RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

Church architecture

Joseph Aloysius Alexander died in Brisbane on 6 January 1983 and was buried in Woden Cemetery after a service at the Russian Orthodox Church of St John the Baptist in Narrabundah. As a direct result of his admiration for the courage and devotion of ordinary Russian people, who maintained the Orthodox faith despite the official anti-religious attitude, he had supported the building of the Church in Canberra. Now a Cathedral, built in the style of 14th century churches of north-west Russia, it is part of the ACT's architectural heritage.

Conclusion

Alexander made a valuable contribution to the ACT's heritage and history in raising the profile of Canberra as the National Capital through his political journalism. He made two unique marks on Old Parliament House: his expulsion from one Chamber but not the other and his introduction of teleprinter communication. He contributed to the development of Canberra suburban values. He was a pioneer in Australian diplomatic representation. Now the 90 or so overseas embassies in Canberra add a unique heritage through their buildings and their rich contributions to Canberra life. He left an invaluable record for posterity through his diaries and through his editing of *Who's Who in Australia*. He contributed to keeping the Canberra & District Historical Society viable, enabling it to house its valuable collection of historical and heritage items and

he contributed to the architectural heritage of Canberra through his help to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral at Narrabundah.

A final item of historical interest. In 1934, Alexander donated a Cup to the Canberra Amateur Swimming Club. The winner of the first race for the Cup, held that year at the Manuka Pool, was Lindsay Knowles with runners-up Bill Dullard and Eric Peterson. All these young men were killed serving in World War II. The Alexander Cup is now the Christening Cup in St Andrew's Church, Forrest.

¹ C. J. Lloyd, *Parliament and the Press: The Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery 1901-88*, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp. 83-5, 95.

² Clem Lloyd, 'Reporting caucus' in *True Believers; the story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, eds John Faulkner and Stuart Macintyre, Allen & Unwin, 200, p. 198.

³ NLA TRC 578, Joseph Aloysius Alexander oral recording 7 September 1977; NLA TRC 121/10, interviewed by Mel Pratt

⁴ Alexander TRC 578.

⁵ Clem Lloyd, 'Reporting Caucus' in *True Believers*, p. 198.

⁶ 'Amazing Sequel to leakage of "Secret Cables". Speaker expels him from Gallery', *Adelaide Advertiser and Register*, 24 April 1931, p. 19.

⁷ *Daily Standard*, 9 May 1934, p. 10.

⁸ Alexander TRS 578.

⁹ Diary 1929.

¹⁰ Diary 1932.

¹¹ CDHS display cabinet.

¹² CDHS *Newsletter* 242, March 1983.

¹³ Stephen Holt, *Canberra Times*, 4 March 2002, p. 12.

¹⁴ Alexander diaries, MS2389/3, 1943.

¹⁵ Alexander diary MS2389/4, loose cutting dated 3 June 1944 in 1944 diary.

¹⁶ J.A. Alexander, *In the shadow: Three years in Moscow*, Herald & Weekly Times, Melbourne, 1949.

¹⁷ Alexander diary, MS2389/4, 1944.

¹⁸ Alexander diary, MS2389/4.

¹⁹ Alexander TRS 578.

²⁰ Alexander TRS 578.

²¹ 'Gang Gang', *Canberra Times*, 16 March 1967.