



Snooping around Flynn's legacy

On the 80th anniversary of the Royal Flying Doctor Service this month, Ann Villiers pays tribute to John Flynn's grand vision by dipping into his personal letters

treasures. I eavesdrop on queries from curious staff inviting detailed accounts of researchers' explorations, or reassessments of their thesis deadlines.

As I wait with anticipation for my selected boxes from the John Flynn Papers (MS 3288) to arrive, I wonder whether the letters will reveal something more than the many books I've already read. Will they spark some deeper, fresher, previously unimagined insight?

When they're on my desk, I find the letters are legibly written on notepaper of various sizes and qualities, inked in a copperplate style and always signed, 'Your affectionate son'. John Flynn wrote monthly to his father, from an amazing range of places across Australia—Morwell, Buchan, Sydney, Toorak, Hamilton, Narracourte, Beltana. Clearly our postal services worked well, as his father's letters also found their way back to Flynn, regardless of his location.

As I read the letters, however, a faint uneasiness seeps into my mind. These letters

The story of John Flynn (1880–1951) has gripped me ever since reading Kay Batstone's book *Outback Heroes: 75 Years of the Royal Flying Doctor Service* (2003). For two years I have been exploring the evolution of his vision to bring aerial medical services to outback Australia, and now I want to dip into some of the source material.

So I find myself in the Library's Manuscripts Reading Room, about to read letters which Flynn wrote to his father in the early 1900s. The room is an inner sanctum, where researchers tap their laptops, click their cameras, and record gems from Library

top:
Australian Inland Mission
Aeroplane Named 'John Flynn'
1950s
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24632758

above:
Crown Studios
*Portrait of John Flynn as a
Young Man with Spectacles*
b&w photograph
Manuscripts Collection
nla.ms-ms3288-0-1

were never intended for public viewing. They were written, just as I write letters today, with the expectation that only the recipient will read them. So I'm torn between wanting to know the person in these intimate epistles, and not wanting to invade the man's privacy by continuing to read. I wonder if my fellow explorers have similar misgivings.

Flynn was quick to see the potential of new technology. In the early 1900s he developed a keen interest in photography. By selling photographs for publication and as postcards, he gained much-needed income during his years of theological study. His letters to his father in Melbourne, who acted as his agent, chronicle his frustrations and success with the newspapers of the day—the *Leader*, the *Australasian* and the *Weekly Times*. For example, with characteristic humour, Flynn comments in November 1906: 'I have not heard from Sydney again and their "next week" is like the proverbial someday.'

One of the captivating elements of researching Flynn is the byways that entice me away from my immediate path, one such being Flynn's photographic contribution to the documenting of Buchan, 360 km east of Melbourne. In 1906, aged 25, Flynn spent a year as a student home missionary in the Buchan district. While travelling on horseback between the lonely settlements, he recorded images of the pioneers, their isolation and living conditions, as well as the unspoilt landscape. He continued this practice throughout his career, taking photographs



wherever he went, giving us a rich, photographic legacy.

While at Buchan, Flynn met Frank Moon, who explored the local caves. On discovering what became known as Moon Cave, Frank arranged for Flynn to take photographs. Subsequent discoveries of caves and formations by Moon and others were also photographed by Flynn. Flynn's promotional efforts are credited with raising awareness of the caves' beauty and influencing the government to open the caves as a tourist destination.

Flynn was a gifted speaker and understood the value of a strong image. A tireless advocate for an aerial medical service, he presented illustrated lectures, turning his photographs into magic lantern slides. These

lectures were also revenue-raising ventures, though sometimes the audience members were reluctant givers. Writing to his father about a lecture he gave in Hamilton in 1909, Flynn comments that it

was not a great success. Audience was good considering the heat and showers of rain, but the good givers did not turn out, and those present let the collection go by without straining themselves.

above:

Howard D. Bulmer
Frank Moon Lying Underneath
Some Stalactites, Buchan
Caves, Victoria [between 1915
and 1930]
b&w glass negative
8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24354212

below left:

John Flynn (1880–1951)
Portrait of Unidentified Group:
A Lantern Slide from John
Flynn's Missionary Days in
Gippsland 1906–07
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24154010





above:
Australian Inland Mission
John Flynn Breaking Camp at
Bloods Creek, South Australia
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24537593

below:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Reverend John Flynn
c.1929
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24680767



However there will be some donations later on which will remedy that.

The most poignant letter I found in Flynn's papers was largely written on the eve of Flynn's 30th birthday. (As context, John Flynn was born in Victoria on 25 November 1880, the youngest of three children; his father was a teacher and lay preacher, and when John was only three years old his mother died in child birth.) Flynn writes from the Manse at Narracourte, South Australia, on 24 November 1910:

I just now wakened to the fact that tomorrow is the 25th and so I have only another hour this side of thirty.

Don't know that there is any special significance in that fact. Certainly it feels much like any other hour.

But before sliding into the years which bring greater responsibilities and wider life generally it would be well for me to turn and thank you for all the love and care of the long years now behind.

There seems to be a deal of the unspeakable Scot in us at times, I fear. The absence of a mother's touch has perhaps intensified the fault. But let me take this opportunity of heartily thanking you for your pains and sacrifices on our behalf.

As to the future, God only knows what it holds in store for us. My giving to the Bush must seem to you inconsiderate. And I shrink from it terribly at times. But somehow I have stumbled into things as they now are, and I dare not turn back. But wherever I move I will try and merit that respect which your name has won among all who know you. If I can carry into the Church that citizenship which you have always displayed even amid most depressing circumstances at times, I will not have lived in vain.

That hour is more than up. So let me open the new decade with the wish that I may prove in it worthy of you and of the cause I seek to serve.

How many of us would express such sentiments to our parents, regardless of our profession? Maybe few of us experience such an early sense of vocation, or perhaps the generational links are severed in our current times of career portfolios.

Once ordained, Flynn moves into the Manse at Beltana, South Australia, in 1911. 'Yes, my district is big,' he writes, 'it is nearly the size of Victoria.' Deftly describing his new home, he tells his father:

This country is peculiar to a Victorian. No grass for 50 miles to the south, and none to the north. Fodder is salt bush and scrub. A little grass may be found in the corners where cattle have camped.

Throughout his career, Flynn did a vast amount of what sounds today like arduous travelling—no passenger jets or four-wheel drives. He explains to his father in February 1913:

I have made arrangements to go to Alice Springs about next Friday. I go 150 miles by camel with a private team, then 50 by mail buggy, and the last 100 or so by mail camels again. I expect to reach there on 24th inst and leave a week later. I should be in Adelaide about 22nd of March, and home a few days later. I have to go almost at once to Sydney, however, and as soon as I return from there I have to proceed to lecture all around Victoria.

In addition to his photography, public speaking and writing, Flynn developed skills in mapping. He used his maps to persuade and influence people, educating them on details about Australia, along with his concept for an aerial medical service. In a 1932 radio broadcast address,

Dr George Simpson, longtime Flynn friend and supporter, described how Flynn liked maps 'to help him think'. Simpson says the map Flynn was most proud of was the one of Australia showing six circles with a radius of 400 miles (640 km) illustrating how the aerial medical service could work.

These days, Flynn's original vision has grown to cover 80 per cent of Australia. This month, the Royal Flying Doctor Service celebrates its 80th birthday. While still recognised for its emergency flights, today's service provides a wide range of medical and health services operating from 22 bases. Each year, Royal Flying Doctor aircraft fly nearly 20 million kilometres—equivalent to 26 trips to the moon and back!

John Flynn, one of Australia's 'greats', has left eloquent legacies that speak to us today of a dedicated, persistent, humorous, compassionate and talented man. A leadership model, indeed, of how to make a lasting difference. I'm left wondering, though—How will we know contemporary 'greats' 50 years from now? Will we be

reading collections of 168-character text messages and coded emails or watching YouTube grabs? Somehow that prospect doesn't engage me as much as delving into the richly worded moments captured in personal letters.

My forays into the Library's Manuscripts, Newspaper and Pictures Collections have given me enormous appreciation of historians who piece together snippets of information to reconstruct a coherent and accurate chronology of events. And how fortunate we are, to have institutions like the National Library as custodians of these treasures which inform us about past lives, places and endeavours.

DR ANN VILLIERS, *Mental Nutritionist*®, delivers keynote presentations based on iconic Australian stories that illuminate today's challenges. www.mentalnutrition.com

Australian Inland Mission Frontier Services
A Community Survey of Australia
coloured lantern slide
8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24284047

