

## ALBUM TELLS A FAMILY STORY

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Sometimes an object strays into our hands and jolts us back to the past.

'Here. You should look after this now,' my older sister said, a few years ago, and held out a book. I almost snatched it from her because I knew my hands were the right hands. It was a long time since I had seen that family keepsake; pored over it as an adolescent; examined the illustrations, verses and signatures; and wondered about the people inside it.

Album. That is what it says on the front. Simple, matter-of-fact, confident. 'Open me!' But I never want to open it immediately. I want to smell its rich age, feel the soft crocodile skin, admire the gold leaf, examine the royal blue and gold inside-cover and finally flick the blue, pink, cream, tan and green pages, to stop by chance at any page and read.

More archival-conscious now, I have photocopied it and only take it out occasionally to relish its richness.

I know who this album belonged to from the inscription on the titlepage which reads 'Mary from Willie Feb 1909'. It was a gift from my grandfather William Thomas Brown to his older sister Mary Ann Brown, aged 31, and shortly to marry Arthur Lloyd (son of John Lloyd senior of Coomber) and move from Rylstone to his property *Woodlawn* at Tooraweenah, near Gulargambone. Most of this can be found in the album.

The first page, created by Mary Ann, shows its quality. 'Killarney' is the title. Above it a Killarney scene: soft mauves of a mountain range, opaque shimmer of water, deep emerald and orange of a lake's edge, the adventure of a small boat, the wonder of an aqueduct. All of this contrasts with the black and white precision of a musical score of the song, 'Killarney', hand printed beneath and decorated with symbolic clover and harp. This illustrated page raises the first of many questions. Why would someone of Scottish ancestry marrying someone of Welsh ancestry choose a patriotic Irish song to illustrate the opening page?

This kind of album – a blank book used to collect the thoughts, advice, good wishes, favourite quotes and verses of friends and family – was popular in those days and served the same purpose as a photograph album. It captured memories. In Mary Ann's album there are 100 entries dated from 1909 to 1933 (two years before she died). There are drawings and paintings, poems and quotations, proverbs, blessings and prayers, each usually with a signature or initials, date and place.

Such albums are a thing of the past, which of course is why they are so valued today. They are objects of beauty as well as being primary historical documents, giving an insight into family, local and social history.

I discover my great grandfather William Lee Brown bestowing on his daughter a blessing in verse accompanied by a watercolour image of the mountain, Mount Brace, near their house:

"Bright be the future which lieth before thee  
Loving and loved may'st thou go on thy way

God in his mercy watch tenderly o'er thee  
Guarding thee ever by night and by day."

There is her sister who writes out a hymn, in short-hand, "Fight the Good Fight"; another who quotes from the poet Southey; and another who does several beautiful paintings and a blessing. Her brothers give advice through verse: "Do not waken pain..." "Make new friends but keep the old..." and "Look always on the sunny side..."

Recognizable families from local history research are scattered through the album: Reverend Herbert Chivers, Thomas Lloyd, H G Mason, C McGill, Minnie Batten, Ruby Morrison. But it is family that is most prominent. Religious and moral themes dominate: looking on the bright side and trusting in God. But there are also entries about friendship and loved ones, romantic love and gender differences.

The final page is a tribute to family with the signatures of all the members written on a painting of green leaves splaying from two central leaves with the words *Mount Brace* (the family home). Somewhat to my surprise I have discovered a family who were artistic, well-read, sensitive, loving and deeply religious in the Church of England faith.

What else could I discover within this album? Certainly something about the life of the great aunt who owned it. A woman who counted among her friends, ministers of the church and graziers, who sometimes visited Sydney and who had cousins in Scotland who were slightly superior towards their colonial relatives.

This album offers a window also into life more than a century ago, before TV, the internet or even radio, when people recognised each other's writing style, developed fine art skills and learnt poetry off-by-heart. It was a world where relationships were gentle, morality fixed and family "all".

Such an album reveals past lives and at the same time confronts us with present lives – our mortality, universal humanity and generational differences.