



THE OWEN ROOM - ITERATIONS AND DECORATIONS

The story behind the Owen Room and its contents



We thank Professor Ben Middleton who provided the details of Major and Mrs Wood on page 5, and to the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes.

The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

THE OWEN ROOM ITERATIONS and DECORATIONS

Introduction

The small function room near the back stairs on Level 2 is now known as the “Owen Room” and is utilised as a multi-functional room, primarily as a private dining room or a discreet meeting room. It has had a variety of purposes and a couple of names since the Club moved into our current buildings in May 1947.

This Note outlines these changes and the stories of some of its contents.

Changing Purposes and Names

When the Club moved into our current premises in May 1947, this room was used as the office for the Secretary-Manager. This was the first time he had enjoyed a dedicated office; in our previous buildings, he worked from a desk or table in one of the ‘public’ areas.

In the major renovations and alterations which occurred in the mid-1990s, his office was relocated upstairs to Level 4, and the Level 2 office was converted to a function room, and was named ‘Montpelier Room’ so as to simplify the booking processes¹.

It retained the name ‘Montpelier Room’ until 26 May 2017 when, as part of the commemoration dinner to celebrate the 70th anniversary of our move to these premises, it was renamed ‘Owen Room’ in honour of Major General John Fletcher Owen KCB, RA, the Commandant of the Queensland Defence Force (1891-1894), the Founder of the Club and our first President.²

As part of the anniversary commemorations, Our Patron, His Excellency The Honourable Paul de Jersey AC, unveiled the ‘Owen Room’ nameplate, thus removing the confusing dual use of the ‘Montpelier’ name.

Artworks

It was a deliberate decision to down-play the ‘military atmosphere’ in this room, and artworks were selected that were of everyday life and appealed to a broad range of tastes.

Three of the six artworks acquired through the *Artist of the Month Programme* hang in the Owen Room³.

Following the acquisition of new artworks as part of the Centenary celebrations of the Club in 1992, (eg *Jacarandas* by Keith Wenzel, hanging in the Glasgow Room) the Club Committee decided to embark on an Artist of the Month Programme. The objectives of this programme were to make the Club an outlet for emerging Queensland and Australian artists, to provide a regularity of change in the artwork featured in the Main Bar, and to give the Club the opportunity to acquire additional artworks.

The key criterion for acquisition was that more than one committee member had to agree that the work was likely to be of long-term value to the Club as a decoration and should be purchased.

A summary of the artists and the “Owen Room artworks” commences overleaf. (The photographs are not of professional standard and are included only to help members to identify the artworks so they can appreciate them ‘in the flesh’.)

¹ “Montpelier’ was selected to honour the name of the original ‘Montpelier’ building on the site which was built in the 1880s and named after the region in southern France. The current building was also named ‘Montpelier’ when it was built in 1910.

² For more details see http://www.unitedserviceclub.com.au/files/8015/3973/9308/HIG_Biography_-_OWEN_v2.0.pdf or the framed biography beside the Owen Room door.

³ The other three are in the Moreton Room, the Norman Pixley Room, and near the elevator on Level 2. See http://www.unitedserviceclub.com.au/files/6415/3959/0773/Artworks_Artist_of_the_Month_Programme_Final_Oct_2018.pdf



Best of Friends (Artist: Ron Van Gennip)



Well, look at that! (Artist: Ron Van Gennip)

Australian impressionist Ron Van Gennip has for almost two decades painted rich canvasses that reveal his favourite subject - he emphatically affirms: *'children and their world. It's all about interpreting what lies just below the surface of their innocence.'*

Born in Australia from parents of an artistic background who moved from Holland to Sydney, Ron was encouraged to draw, sketch and pursue the wonders of his childhood amid the majestic visuals of the famous Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. At the age of 18 years he accepted a three-year working scholarship with Sydney Technical College and also studied at the Drummoyne Art Society under Joshua Smith.

Ron has had numerous solo exhibitions in Australia as well as selected group exhibitions in Hong Kong (Wan Chai), Japan (Tokyo Austrade) and London (House of Dunhill)"

Wylde's *'Australian Art'* provides a useful biography. It presents him as follows: *'Harmonious, graceful and elegant, Ron Van Gennip's work brings together the very best of impressionism. His recent works are sensitive, inspiring and timeless, presenting a natural gentle eloquence combined with rest and relaxation...'*

Ron Van Gennip has the distinction of being the only artist of the month from whom the Club purchased three paintings.⁴

⁴ The third is an untitled painting of three ibis on the edge of a pond (hanging in the Norman Pixley Room).



Two Green Apples (Artist: Christopher McVinish)

One gallery's website describes Christopher McVinish as *a master of light. It is essentially this element of his work, which invites us to see the commonplace as special and suffused with potential...His still life paintings convey a reverence for the Dutch Masters and draw attention to how memory and a sense of the divine can be evoked by 'ordinary' objects.*

Table

The Owen Room contains the oldest surviving object in the Club, viz: the 'Wood Table'.



If you look closely you will see a plaque on it that states it "*was made in 1883 by R. T. Garget of Brisbane and presented to the United Service Club by Major and Mrs J. W. Wood, 1929*".

The table used to be in the bay window of what is now the Members' Bar on Level 2 when it was the Reading Room, before the conversion works in the mid-1990s. As part of those works, a new Secretary/Manager's office on Level 4 was created, and what is now called the Owen Room was converted to a function/meeting room.

We needed a square table to fit the newly refurbished room, so new sections were added to make it square, and it was repolished and moved into the Montpelier/Owen Room as part of the reorganisation. That work was done professionally and you need to look hard to see it.

The Donors, Major John William Wood and his wife Lucilla Ellen (née Lucas).⁵

Major Wood was born 9 September 1863 and died 2 October 1935. He joined the Oxley Infantry Regiment of the Queensland Rifles after being commissioned as a provisional lieutenant on 17 February 1897. Then began his ascent through the ranks. The next year, on 28 May 1898, he was promoted to substantive lieutenant (8th Infantry). Next, he was promoted to captain on 15 May 1899 (2/15th Infantry Regiment [Oxley Regiment]), before becoming an honorary major on 20 April 1912. Finally, he transferred to the retired list on 1 May 1919.

In 1930 (the year after they donated the table), the Woods lived in "Jesmond" in Yabba Street, Ascot; perhaps it is one of the old Queenslanders still standing there today.

Nundah Cemetery burial records have an entry for him in 1935, (and for 1929 for his wife). There are other references for Major Wood's donation of imagery and his time/work for publications, so he was a generous man.

Their son Roland Norman Wood (born 20 April 1900) served for four years in the senior cadets before he enlisted in the army on 5 September 1918 aged 18 years 4 months. This was just before the end of World War One, so he was soon discharged on 28 December. His brief time in uniform was spent on a physical training course.

⁵ **Sources:** NAA: J1795, 4/595; Title: WOOD John William, born 9 September 1863 - military officer's record of service; Contents range 1897 – 1935; Series number: J1795; Control symbol: 4/595; Access status: Open; Barcode: 9100340 <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=9100340>
NAA: B2455, WOOD R N; Title: Wood Roland Norman : SERN DEPOT 24440 : POB Brisbane QLD : POE Brisbane QLD : NOK F Wood John William; Contents range: circa 1914 - circa 1920; Series number: B2455; Control symbol: WOOD R N; Access: Open; Barcode 1916978
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=1916978>

