

expanded

Alice McClelland Notes

1/4/87

Subjects:

94 yrs old
Born in West Melbourne
Admitted to RVIB at 5 yrs, 25/4/1898
Students home one weekend each 2 months
Playing various musical instruments (incl pipe organ)
Learning Braille
No Australian History taught
All textbooks from England
Tailors Slate
Caledonian Society
Braille Library
Alice's Aunt was a singer, one of Melba's singers
Worked in RVIB factory
Then started job at Braille Library 1/3/1922
Shorthand Association
65 years working at library (still working as of this interview)
Association (AAB)
Going to notoriety, walking up Collins St
What else she learned at school
Attitudes about boys & girls mixing
Going to Church
Hearing her first radio
Telephone
Motorcar
Royal visit to Melbourne, 1901
Death of Queen Victoria
Raleigh St Hostel
Boarding with different people

Pension

Only boys (not girls) were allowed out on w'ends
First trip on aeroplane

People:

Allan Nuske
Mr Hogarth
Miss Annie Campbell
Mr Roberts
David Palmer
Oscar Hayes
Austin Anderson
Reg Hart
Bill Sommerskill
Eva Kennedy
Mina Francella
Minnie Reardon
Nellie Grey
Mr McClelland
Mr & Mrs Harrison
Tilly Aston
Mayor Luxton
George Benson
Mr Hedger
Miss Shrimpton
Duke & Duchess of York
Queen Victoria
King
Ada Sharp
Miss Kelly
Mrs Bartram
Mr Ventlein? (music
master, German, who left
before WW1)
Mr Sutcliffe

expanded

Alice McClelland
Date: 1st April 1987
Interviewer: Alan Nuske
Venue: Villa Maria

Alan: Your real name is McClelland, right?

Alice: I'm not good at the art of public speaking.

Alan: Never mind; don't worry at all about that. Your name is McClelland, isn't it?

Alice: McClelland ... M-c-C-l-e-l-l-a-n-d.

Alan: There's a lot of people who'd be listening to this, who would remember you and who would know you from many years ago. I don't suppose I'm telling a secret when I say that you're ninety ...

Alice: ... Four.

Alan: Ninety-four. Well there you are; you said it yourself. I'm sure you've had a very interesting, long and happy life, one way or another.

Alice: I don't know that it's been terribly happy, really ... just ordinary.

Alan: Just ordinary? Well, a lot of people remember you, and you remember a lot of things that many of us would like to know about; it's this, that I would like to talk to you about, if you don't mind.

Do you mind if we go back to your very early days. Where were you born, Miss. Mac?

Alice: Where?

Alan: Mmm.

Alice: In West Melbourne.

Alan: Was it a big family?

Alice: Six ... six of us.

Alan: Were you blind at birth?

Alice: Yes.

Alan: So straight away, it was known that you needed ... and you went straight away, then, to the Institute?

Alice: Well, no. I was home, for some years, and then a friend said to my mother, "I think you ought to take her down to the Institute, where she could go to school". So

that was how I went; I went in what turned out to be, later on, ANZAC Day 1898 (25th of April 1898).

Alan: In 1898 ... you were 5. What did your father do? What was your father's job?

Alice: He was a worker, and he did whatever jobs came available.

Alan: And your brothers and sisters? What did they do?

Alice: It was just an ordinary family, you know. Went to school, of course ...

Alan: Did you see much of them after you had gone to the Institute?

Alice: We used to come home at the end of every 2 months; they used to let us come home for the weekend.

Alan: That was every child in the school, then?

Alice: They could, if they had anywhere to go.

Alan: Who was in charge of the Institute, in those days?

Alice: Mr. Hogarth was the superintendent.

Alan: Who were the teachers of the school?

Alice: There was Miss. Campbell – Miss. Annie Campbell – and she was my teacher when I first went there; she had a sister, there ...

Alan: And who else were teachers, there?

Alice: I really don't remember. There was Mr. Roberts; he was blind.

Alan: Was he? What did he teach?

Alice: He was a schoolteacher, but he was blind.

Alan: What about Mr. Palmer – David Palmer?

Alice: He was one of the elder boys when I came there; he was 10 years older than me.

Alan: Was he really? When did he come here to teach music? Was there any music when you first went to school?

Alice: Oh, yes. We were all put to some kind of music.

Alan: What did you do?

Alice: I was put to the violin and the piano and, later on, the pipe organ.

Alan: They had the big pipe organ there then, did they?

Alice: I think there were only the 2 manuals ...

Alan: That's right – in the dining room.

Alice: No, they were in the music hall.

Alan: Was it?

How many children were at the school when you were there?

Alice: Oooh, I don't know ... not many; there were: Oscar Hayes, Austin Anderson (he was there, then – he was a little older than me, but not much). I was the youngest. Then, Reg Hart came, and Bill Sommerskill ... they were the same age as myself.

Alan: I notice you mentioned only boys ... what about the girls?

Alice: Well, there was: Eva Kennedy, Mina Francella ... they were musical and were in the 15-16 group; and Minnie Reardon – she was in the place where they made the brooms ... what they called the "Pan room"; she worked on the "pitch", you know, and making the brooms.

Alan: Tell me, what did you learn at school?

Alice: Oh ... I don't know ...

Alan: You learned Braille, of course.

Alice: Braille, yes, we all learned Braille.

Alan: Right, and what else did you learn?

Alice: Oh ...

Alan: Did you learn history?

Alice: All our work came from England, of course, and there was no Australian history ...

Alan: And you did maths and arithmetic?

Alice: Yes, oh yes; we used to do figures ...

Alan: On the slate?

Alice: On the slate ... little figures.

Alan: Yes, I remember those. I don't think they're still using that, now.

Alice: I don't know what they use, now.

Alan: Computers or something.

Alice: They had the little figures, and you'd turn them round ...

Alan: That's right, and then turn them over the other way with two dots on them.

Alice: That's right ...

Alan: They made the 0 and the 9, and the decimal point and a few other things. And what other things did you learn at school? Did you learn typing?

Alice: Oh, no, I never did. The older girls did – Nellie Grey ... those girls. I was only a child, so I didn't learn those things. I really haven't much to tell you about that.

Alan: Well never mind. At what age did you leave school?

Alice: I was there until 1922.

Alan: You were nearly 19, then. No, you would've been nearly 30.

Alice: Yes, well I went from the school into the brush shop; that was hard yakka, I tell you.

Alan: I'll bet it was. Tell me about that.

Alice: We used to work for 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ a day. We used to sit on stools with no backs on them. Then they advertised for a revisor ... they called it "revisor", but it was proofreading, you know. I put in an application, not that I was considered to be a great Still, I got it.

Alan: Where was this?

Alice: It was through Mr. McClennan was our social secretary.

Alan: Where was this? Was it at the Braille library?

Alice: No, no, it was at the Institute ... well, yes, at the library, and he was the social secretary there; he used to belong to the Caledonian Society. Well, my aunt Nellie was a singer ... she was one of Melba's singers in those days, and he said, oh yes, I knew her aunt", and it was through his kindness that I got the job, really.

Alan: That's good. And then?

Alice: Then I went to the library, and I started on the 1st March 1922.

Alan: And that was on Commercial Road.

Alice: Yes.

Alan: How long had the library been going?

Alice: Since 1895.

Alan: Oh, yes. Who started the library?

Alice: Well, it was started ... there was a meeting called – I think it was in the Prahran Town Hall – and there was a lady who wrote a paper, and she belonged to the Shorthand Association”; she said, to Miss. Tilley Aston, “What shall I write I paper on, Tilley?”, and Miss. Aston said, “Write a paper on the need of literature for the blind”. So this lady (I can’t think of her name) wrote this paper for the Shorthand Association, and this meeting was held at the Prahran town Hall, and Mr. Luxton – who was the mayor of Prahran – called the meeting of the association, and they held this meeting in the Town Hall. There was a Mr. Harrison there, and Mr. Harrison was very impressed with this need for literature for the blind, and he came home and told his wife. Mrs. Harrison was a very forthright lady and she said that if she could help, she would be glad to do so, so she made a room available in her house at Charlotte Place St Kilda. Miss. Aston offered to teach anybody who could care to learn Braille ... she would be willing to teach them, and that was how the Braille library started. When I went there, it was a very different set up to how it is now; now, it’s incorporated with the public library, and it’s not the friendly place it used to be; it’s more of a business, now. These people come and go, and I sit up in the back room; they asked whether I cared to come in part time; I was glad to be able to do so – I didn’t want to retire.

Alan: Do you mean that you still go to work there?

Alice: Yes, I go Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, and I come home at dinnertime.

Alan: Well that’s wonderful ... really marvellous. What an interesting story. So you were there from 1922, and you’ve been there ever since.

Alice: Yes, ever since.

Alan: Is that the only job you had?

Alice: Yes, it’s the only job I’ve got.
They pay me so much per sheet, for correcting.

Alan: Well that’s really wonderful that you’re still willing and able to go into the library ... you’ve been doing it for 65 years.
Tell me, did meet Tilley Aston?

Alice: Oh, yes.

Alan: Tell me about Tilley Aston. What was she like?

Alice: She died in about 1947.

Alan: What was she like as a lady?

Alice: She was one of the founders of the Association, of course. She was a very forthright person.

Alan: Do you remember whether she was tall or short?

Alice: I don't think she was that tall.

Alan: And what was her voice like?

Alice: She didn't have a deep voice ... just an ordinary, plain voice.

Alan: She must've been a remarkable woman.

Alice: Oh, she was.

Alan: You met her a number of times. Did you ever work with her?

Alice: Well, she came into the library for books, and that sort of thing, but she wasn't involved in the administration.

Alan: Tell me, what was it like to be a blind person – and particularly, a blind girl – when you were young? What did you do, for example, after school-hours were finished? What did you girls do?

Alice: After school-hours, there wasn't anything ... reading was our main occupation – in Braille; we had nothing else. There were no talking books of that sort; they didn't come in until years afterwards. In those days, the older people were quite willing to learn Braille; old farmers – people in the country – were quite willing to come along ... George Benson used to go through in the town to teach the blind people to read; he used to go by himself – he had nobody to take him.

Alan: When you were at the school, did they take you for any trips?

Alice: Sometimes we used to get invitations to go to various notorieties ... but wherever you went, you had to walk up Collins Street; there were no equipages to drive you to these places – they'd take you by tram into the town, and then you had to walk up Collins Street ... sometimes it'd be very wet, too.

Alan: Did they teach you about make-up or cooking or other things that, perhaps, you might need later in your life?

Alice: No. They taught us nothing, really. We had to clean our own shoes ...

Alan: Yes, but were you taught how to sew?

Alice: The teacher tried to teach me how to do hemming, but I wasn't very good at it.

Alan: Did you ever have any social contact with boys at school?

Alice: Oh dear, dear. They were the most evil-minded people that ever I struck.

Alan: What, boys?

Alice: No ... their idea of ...

Alan: Tell me about them.

Alice: Well ... you'd hardly dare to open your mouth; if you were caught talking to boys, you were up to no good – according to them. Anything like that ...

Alan: Why did they do that, do you think? Why was that? Did you ever think about that, or talk about that amongst yourselves?

Alice: No, I don't think we did. We just thought they were evil-minded, that's all. We saw the boys at school, you see, but we never saw them out (of school). The only time I ever saw the boys at all (outside school) was on the 5th Sunday in the month; the local preachers used to come down and conduct services on a Sunday night, and on the 5th Sunday of the month, nobody came so they used to let us go to church. Of course, we were very religious in those days; we were glad to go to church on the 5th Sunday because we could walk home with the boys.

Alan: Wonderful ... that's good.

Alice: It was a very restricted life we had as children.

Alan: You did, indeed. It's different now.

Alice: I wouldn't know because I'm not connected with the Institute. The workers broke away on account of ... they had nowhere to go after work time, and that's how the Association was formed. They met together to see what they could do to find the children somewhere to go after school-hours; that's how the Association came to be formed in the first place.

Alan: Did you girls play any sport, or do anything outdoors? Skipping? Did you skip?

Alice: We had a skipping rope, but we didn't play any sports; that came later on. The girls had a sort of cricket team up at Kooyong, but it didn't last long ... they didn't seem to keep it up.

Alan: No. I remember that.

Tell me, do you remember when you first heard a radio?

Alice: Yes ...

Alan: It must've been hugely exciting for you.

Alice: There was a doctor – I don't know what his name was – and he used to invite some of them around to his place on a Monday night, to listen to this ... whatever it

was; it turned out to be a radio. I didn't seem to be all that keen about coming, but I remember coming down to the music hall in later life; they used to have dances and things in the music hall ... and Mr. Hedger, who was an ex-superintendent, had a radio there, and it was the first time I really ... things you put on your ears, and you listened.

Alan: It must've been wonderful, to blind people particularly, because it would open up such a new world.

Alice: I suppose so, although I didn't take much interest in it, somehow. I don't know why, but ... times go on and go on and they just come and they go.

Alan: What about the telephone? Do you remember the first telephone you ever used?

Alice: Oh, well, when I used to go up to stay with my friend Rosie Joseph ... I used to go up to stay with her people, and they had a telephone; we never had a telephone at our place.

Alan: You must've thought that was rather wonderful, too.

Alice: Oh, yes.

Alan: Do you remember your first ride in a motorcar?

Alice: Well ... we had a lady at the library, an assistant – her name was Miss. Shrimpton – and she had bought a Fiat car, and she took us for a ride in her car. I thought it was wonderful to be taken in this car, for a ride; all we had ever heard were horses ... clip clop clip clop ... the horses, you know, going along St. Kilda Road. Of course, there was a great "to do" when the Duke and Duchess of York came out here

...

Alan: What year are you talking about?

Alice: I think it was in the very early part of the century ... 1901.

Alan: Yes, because he became Edward VII. And he came out to open Parliament.

Alice: Yes.

Alan: Did you meet him?

Alice: We all stood outside the front gate of the institute. The Duke and Duchess of York came out here and the horses were clip-clopping along St. Kilda Road. We had a holiday – I think we had a week.

Alan: A week!

Alice: I remember my father taking me into the city; they had different arches up; they had one called the Queen's Arch. My father took me round the different places in the city.

Alan: Could you see a little in those days?

Alice: Yes. I could see light and colours ...

Alan: You can't see them now?

Alice: no. My sight dwindled as I got older, until I got to the stage where I wouldn't know whether it was light or dark.

Alan: Do you remember when Queen Victoria died?

Alice: Yes.

Alan: Tell me, where were you and what did you think ... what happened?

Alice: I wasn't very well – I don't know what was wrong with me. My father took me to see the doctor and as we were coming home, he said, "Oh, the Queen's dead". I said, "How do you know the Queen's dead?"; he said, "The flags are at half-mast". That was in 1901, you see. Oh, it was a great "to do" and the old Queen was dead. It was quite a new era, altogether. Then there was King Edward VII ...

Alan: ... then George ...

Alice: She was one of those who was not amused, you know.

Alan: Yes, yes, she was quite a straight sort of a lady.

Alice: The King – the Duke, then – wanted a new smoking room put in, and she asked what the workmen were doing there; he said, "They're putting in the new lavatory, Your Majesty". They didn't tell her, you know.

Alan: Didn't they? She thought that was necessary, but not a smoking room.

Alice: Yes, that was what he wanted. They used to cast an eye, to see how she looked, when they came in; they'd say, "We're just fitting a new lavatory, Your Majesty" .

Alan: Anyway, can we get back to you again? You're more interesting than Your Majesty.

So you went to the library in 1922 and then you stayed in the hostel in Raleigh Street?

Alice: No. I boarded at different places. I can't remember when I came to Raleigh Street. I don't know how it came about that I came here, to Raleigh Street, in the first place. By that time, it had been open for quite a number of years. I must've gone from the Institute out boarding, with different people, through advertisements.

Alan: When you started at the library, how much were you paid a week? Do you remember?

Alice: I think I was paid about 2 pounds a week.

Alan: Was there a blind pension in those days?

Alice: Oh yes.

Alan: When did that begin, and how much was it?

Alice: They used to give us 10 Shillings, I think. We weren't allowed to have more than a certain amount. All these things, they go from you, you know.

Alan: Of course. You've got a marvellous memory for things. Then you worked at the Braille library, for the rest of your life. Tell me a little bit other things ... what do you like to read? What's the best book you've ever read?

Alice: They all go in there for the science fiction, which I can't understand – it's beyond me. I don't seem to be able to understand ...

Alan: You've read hundreds of books, but did you ever read just for your own fun? Something that you've wanted to read.

Alice: Yes, well we used to come over to the library and choose the books ...

Alan: And what sort of books did you like to read?

Alice: Oh, romances, you know. Too many Irish books, as a Chinaman said.

Alan: Did he? Too many Irish books?

Alice: I get them for correcting, now. It puts me in mind of a girl who used to tell us a story of when a Chinaman came – the vegetable man – and he said to this girl kiss, kriss, and the girl (the Irish maid) said, "Get away with you". The mistress came down and said, "What John meant was 'cress' as in watercress – they don't seem able to pronounce the 'R's". The next day he came, so Mary greeted him, I suppose, and John said, "Me no likey Irish girl ... too muchee fightem".

Look, I really haven't got anything of interest to tell you.

Alan: You've been very interesting. I'm going to ask you an interesting question ...

Alice: Our lives were very restricted, you know. The boys used to be allowed out on the weekends, but the girls weren't allowed out.

Alan: Weren't they, really?

Alice: Oh, no.

Alan: Look, Miss. Mac., tell me this, and take your time: if you could have one day of your life again, which day would it be? Which day do you remember as being the most exciting?

Alice: I don't know. I'm too old, now; memories go from me. I couldn't really tell you.

Alan: There's no one special day that you think of very often?

Alice: You ask more than I can tell you. I don't think things out – I just accept them from day to day.

Alan: Well tell me this, then: is there anything that you'd like to say to the blind people of today, as your message for the future of blind people, and what they try to do or who they are? Is there anything you'd like to say ... in your experience, wisdom, and hopes for the future?

Alice: I don't think much about blind people. As I say, I live here now; I'm thankful to be here at the Villa. You see, at the time that I came, everything was very Catholic, but they got that they would take anybody – any blind person who wanted somewhere to go. At this particular time, the girls' hostel was closed down because there were only 5 of us going there and it wasn't economical to keep it open. The boys' hostel was left open, which is still in existence. I had to advertise for somewhere to go, for board and lodging; Ada Sharp said, "I think that if I were you, I would say in the advertisement that you were blind because people knew, then, what they were getting, you see". So, Mr. ????, who was the Secretary of the Villa Maria ... rang the then Secretary (Miss. Kelly), and he said, "Miss. Kelly, I've got a spare room here; if Miss. Mac would like to have it ...". I used to call in, on my way to work, in the morning to see Mrs. Bartram(?); she lived up here in Villa Maria, upstairs, and she said that they had a room that I would like. I said that I didn't care if it was down in the stables – I'd be so thankful. Well, that was 17 years ago, and I've been here ever since. I'm very happy to be here.

Alan: That's good. And it's been very nice talking to you, indeed. And you said your life wasn't very interesting, but I found that very interesting. There are many people who love you very much indeed, and hope you see 100 years, and more.

Alice: Oh, lord, I'm not anxious.

Alan: Oh but we are, though. Don't think of yourself, we're anxious that you be 100 ...

Alice: That's all very well.

Alan: So long as you keep as well as you are ... and you are keeping well, aren't you? You seem to be well.

Alice: Oh, yes.

Alan: Do you eat well? Sleep well?

Alice: No, I don't sleep well.

Alan: Oh, dear.

Alice: I have horrible dreams. I dream I'm in an aeroplane ... or I dream I'm on a train to Colac, or somewhere...

Alan: Have you been in an aeroplane?

Alice: Yes, I have.

Alan: Where have you been?

Alice: I had my first trip in an aeroplane in 1947; I went up to my cousin in Cairns, and it took 14 hours, in those days.

Alan: Do you know how long it takes, now?

Alice: Oh, I don't know.

Alan: Four hours.

Alice: I wouldn't go now. My cousin would say, "Why don't you come?", and I'd say, "My travelling days are done". The only travel I'd take is when the Lord calls me... or whoever it is.

Alan: Have you ever been overseas?

Alice: No, I've never been out of the country.

Alan: If you could go overseas, where would you like to go?

Alice: I wouldn't like to go anywhere. I don't have any wish whatsoever to travel overseas.

Alan: England? America? Places you've read about?

Alice: No, I'd leave that to all these blind people. I wouldn't go on my own to Richmond, let alone go on my own overseas. These blind people can go ... I think they're marvellous, myself. I haven't got the courage.

Alan: Anyway, Miss. Mac, it's been lovely talking to you.

Alice: I'm very sorry that I'm not more forthcoming to tell you what you want to know, Alan. You have to do the asking, and I have very little of the telling.

Alan: Well, it's been very good, and there's much more in that than you think.

Alice: You see, Mr. Palmer came into the teaching after Mr. Ventlein(??) – who was the music master ... he was German, and we often wondered whether he was here to spy out the land.

Alan: Oh, I see, in the First World War.

Alice: Yes, he went just before the First World War broke out. After he went, there was a Mr. Sutch...

Alan: Sutcliffe.

Alice: ... that came to the music department.

Alan: I think you're wanted for your dinner, now.

Alice: He said, "I don't think any of the blind people would be able to come and play at my funeral" I thought that he needn't worry because we wouldn't want to go. His funeral was very ... he died of the flu, Mr. Hogarth. *** it is not clear, to me, who Alice is referring to, here ****

Alan: You thought he was here as a German spy, Mr. Ventlein.

Alice: Well, we wondered.

***** There is a knocking on the door *****

Alan: Well, it's your teatime, and thank you very much indeed. It's been really marvellous.