PERSONAL

We are glad to hear that the President is making good progress towards recovery. Best wishes from us all.

CONCERNING A LITTLE WOODEN BOX

Although "keepsake" is a faded word these days, it is the only appropriate term for the contents of a little wooden box in my possession: a box which, after 150 years, has still not suffered the fate of most things of its kind, because as a rule when the sentimental saver of the memento dies, the appeal and purpose of the trifle disappears, and it quickly makes its way to the garbage dump. But not this box. It recalls early days in the life of old Wollongong.

Charles Throsby Smith must have been a very lonely man when his first wife, Sarah, died late in 1838, leaving him at Bustle Farm with a young family of seven children, the eldest then aged twelve, the youngest a baby of three months. It so happened, however, that in Smith Street, Wollongong, there lived a man, formerly an Edinburgh lawyer, named Peter Jackson, whose wife, Isabella Campbell, was petite, very beautiful, and eighteen years younger than her husband.

The Jacksons were friends of the Smiths, but the melancholy fact was that the husband, who had vainly come to the colony for his health's sake, was dying from what was later described as a very painful and lingering illness. He died on 13 June 1839, leaving his widow and a small and pretty little daughter, also called Isabella.

So there were two families, both recently bereaved; and by special licence Mrs. Jackson became Mrs. Smith in the early part of August in the same year.

Nowadays we would say that such a marriage, however premature it might have seemed at the time, was a very sensible arrangement, but Victorian sensibilities doubtless caused a lot of gossip in the incipient town, and much looking down prim noses. Therefore, as an obvious escape from such unwelcome notoriety, on the following 6 December the barque "Duncan", Captain Wardle, sailed in ballast from Sydney for Manila and London, bearing as passengers the newlywed Mr. and Mrs. Smith and two daughters, picking up cargo on the voyage.

Of the daughters, one was the second Smith child, Maria Rebecca, then aged eleven, while the other was her step-sister, Isabella Jackson, then aged about six or seven. Arrived in Britain, the parents had much visiting to do, and this took them to Scotland for long spells, little Isabella accompanying them. But Maria, being of school age and thus having to continue her education, was placed in a boarding school, Mrs. Clark's, at Ponders End, then just out of London. The girls there were of all ages, one gathers, ranging from very young to late teen-age. Maria seems to have been very happy and much loved by the other girls. Surviving letters show that English relatives kept close contact with her, and other letters came from others in Scotland. Moreover, an easy fondness had matured between the two families now united by this late marriage. Maria and Isabella were especially attached. Indeed, one of the letters is in the large childish hand of Isabella telling how she had finished sewing a gift for Maria. Presumably it was not unladylike or unseemly as between step-sisters to mention the otherwise unmentionable: the gift was to be a pair of garters.
Two years or so went by, and a return to Australia approached; Maria would have to leave Ponders End and her many school friends. Loved as she was for her own sake, she probably enjoyed a special appeal because she would soon be sailing to the other side of the world, to the land of convicts, blackamoors, and birds that laugh, if you please. Thereupon, there came to Maria a flow of mementoes of wide variety: keepsakes, every one of them, however trivial. Perhaps the most touching is a letter from a younger girl which suggests that she was motherless, but who in her loneliness found a warm confidante in this young lady from the antipodes. Quotation is irresistible. She wrote:

"My dear Maria,

I with the greatest pleasure sit down to write these few lines to you one who I love so dearly. I am glad you like your present I thought it was not worth giving you now Maria do not attempt to buy me anything because I feel quite satisfied and pleased with that little pincushion you gave me I am sure it is quite as good as I gave you and you better not get me anything if you do I shall be very angry with you I am very much obliged to you all the same I think it was a great shame [for people] not to tell me [warn me?] that Papa was here I could not speak to him without crying I dont know what it was and he thinks that I am very unhappy but I told him I was not but he would not believe it he asked me such a many times I was so sorry when he bid me good bye but I must try and forget it I suppose Good bye dear Maria while I remain

Yours affectionately E. Berry."

Other outpourings were just as intimate as that from the sadly fluttering heart of young Miss Berry. Many notes must have been handed over secretly; they were demurely and properly addressed "Miss Smith" on the outside of tiny envelopes but spoke within to Maria in undisguised affection, as often as not with an injunction to the effect of "Do not show this to any one". One girl, obviously too small even to write, made some meaningless pencil marks on a piece of cartridge paper of postage-stamp size, so that Maria had to write on the back the name of the toddler who had presented it. Another painted a similar card primitively in watercolours with "Miss Smith" above it, enclosed, like others, in an elaborately folded sheet of paper. There were locks of hairs, a "little Bag", and fripperies in the form of "needle books of perforated cardboard - coloured, embossed, embroidered -- each tied with ribbons of mauve, gold or primrose: all the essence of Victorianism. And there was a flat, silken pinholder the size of one of fifty-cent coins with pins stuck around the edges so as not to spoil the central painting which the accompanying note explained to be the Sea of Galilee, but which looks much more like the lagoon of a particularly lush tropical island.

But what to do with them all? The bags and pincushions and other utilities were of course used and presumably worn out; yet the shy notes remained. So Maria got a small, light box of thin pliable wood, of a type which an apothecary might have used in dispensing papers of powders for ladies ailing or with the vapours. And there the cherished keepsakes were placed. They remain there to this day.

Arrived back in Wollongong, Maria resumed her colonial life, but with differences. Prior to her overseas trip she and some of her sisters had been deemed to be rather tomboyish as, wearing broad cabbage-tree hats, they rode ponies side-
saddle, flying over the green paddocks of their father’s farm on Smith’s Hill. Now she had to behave suitably as a young lady with a London education. Moreover she was growing up into young womanhood. She was never to lose the distinction she had learned at Ponders End, but the fact remained that Mrs. Clark’s was now the width of the world away. So Maria could well have thrown away her little wooden box evoking childish memories of schooldays merging ever further into the past.

Yet she did not. Far from it: to the collection she added more locks of hair, including those of the step-brothers who were later born to her father and stepmother. Her affection for that box of mementoes continued; this was borne out most of all by the addition on 16 August 1850 of another lock of brown hair, belonging to Alfred Turner, later Police Magistrate in Wollongong. Maria had just become his bride. The last addition was of a wisp of baby’s hair, fair and fine as silk. It was that of one of her grandchildren: “Jeanie Osborne, 19 months old”.

Well, what does one do these days with such a box of relics? Does one do what Maria could well have done over a century ago -- consign the lot to the wastepaper basket? It would have been easy then, one would think. Now it is harder, because these trivia of sheer Victorian sentimentality have acquired all the charm of a bygone age, an age of feeling, for all its faults. And it so happens that Jeanie Osborne was my mother. So I certainly can’t bring myself to send them the ultimate way of most keepsakes. Could you?

Edgar Beale

“DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN”
KIAMA RAILWAY OPENING

The railway to Kiama was opened for traffic yesterday, and in the course of the day five trains reached that town, or terminus, from Wollongong, four of them being all the way through from Clifton. From Kiama to Clifton, four trains also ran. Unfavorable as was the weather, very considerable numbers of people, chiefly from Bulli, Clifton, and Wollongong, patronised the line. The rain, however, prevented hundreds from taking the excursion ....

Several persons came from the southward, principally as far as Wollongong, but for one that came from that direction, a dozen at least must have travelled to Kiama. In fact, at one time of the day there appeared to be more Bulli people in the town of Kiama than any others. Opening demonstration there was none, the important event of the railway being opened in their town being treated by the people of Kiama with the utmost indifference, so far at any rate as appearances event. The trains arrived and left again with little more apparent animation than might have been expected were the inhabitants of the adjacent cemetery the only residents of that part of the district. Indeed, it was stated that the Harmony Band, which accompanied the 9 o’clock train from Wollongong, was much disposed to play “Down Among the Dead Men” on seeing so few living inhabitants of the place about on their arrival .... Truly it was appropriate on the part of the parliamentary representative of such constituents that he too should “improve the occasion” by missing the train at Wollongong, thereby being delayed about three hours in that town, and reaching Kiama only about 6 o’clock in the evening. But doubtless the state of the weather, which completely pre-