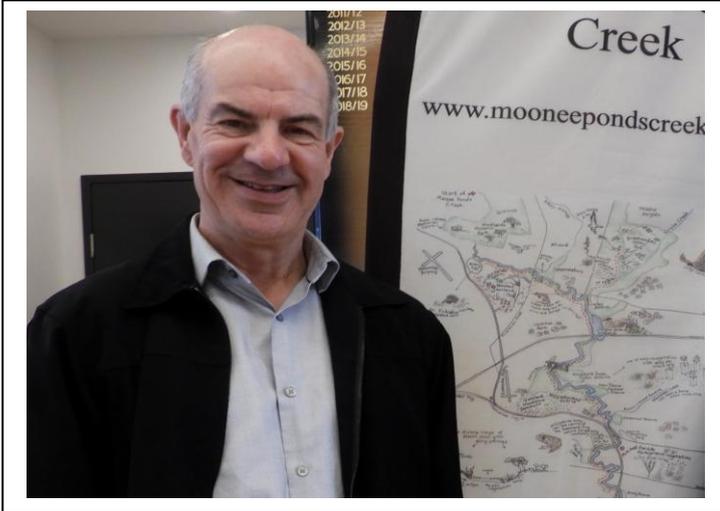


30th Anniversary Address



**by the Hon. Kelvin Thomson
President, Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek 1989 - 2019**

The Moonee Ponds Creek was once a charming and tranquil area, with an abundance of natural vegetation and wildlife. When European settlers came across it, the Moonee Ponds Creek terminated in what was known as the Blue Lake. In the 1840s George Gordon McCrae, looking at it from Flagstaff Hill, described Blue Lake as “Intensely blue, nearly oval and full of the clearest salt water, but is by no means deep....the whole air was heavy with the mingled odours of the golden Myrnong flowers and purple fringed lilies... curlews, ibises and blue cranes were there in numbers ... Black Swans occasionally visited it, as did flocks of wild ducks...”

The land around here, between the Moonee Ponds Creek and Pascoe Vale Road, was acquired by John Pascoe Fawcner. The historians have given him an intriguing set of characteristics, describing him as “plain-featured, rough-mannered, puny, active, dogmatic, abusive, cantankerous, litigious, selfless, patriotic, opposed to privilege, independent in religion, self-educated, generous, shrewd, persistent, and a one man political movement” - not that there’s anything wrong with that!

You couldn’t attribute to him any environmental or ecological sensitivity. In 1841 he drew up a lease for part of his land to his father, which required the lessee to “fell, cut down, grub up and otherwise destroy and remove all the native indigenous trees wood scrub and underwood whatsoever growing or to grow upon the said land or any part thereof except fruit trees or such trees as are or shall be marked ...for ornament hedgerows or boundary marks.”

That view should of course be understood as very much a product of its time, but in the light of it is not surprising that much of the Moonee Ponds Creek valley was denuded in the following years.

And then in 1969-70 the Victorian Government built the Tullamarine Freeway, now called City Link, largely down the valley of the Moonee Ponds Creek, this being the line of least resistance compared with buying up and demolishing homes in their hundreds or even thousands.

The Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, predecessor to Melbourne Water, took the opportunity to concrete line and straighten much of the creek, in accordance with a popular engineering theory at the time that concrete lining would reduce flooding by taking the water into Port Philip Bay as quickly as possible.

As a result of this and other indignities, the Creek became a barren eyesore, and much of its original charm was lost. There was opposition by local residents to the concrete lining, which reached a fever pitch as the concrete went into Strathmore. The Strathmore Progress Association played a key role in convincing the Hamer Government to tell the Board of Works to stop the concrete lining, which it did, just outside the

Strathmore North Primary School, and to engage with local residents if it wanted to proceed any further. I will show you on the little walk we are going to do after the cake cutting the spot where the concrete was stopped.

A Committee was set up to consider the issue. My father Allan had become known as a local environmentalist, and the Broadmeadows Environment Committee (back then Strathmore was part of the City of Broadmeadows) asked him to represent them at meetings. But the meetings were held in the daytime, and he could not get to them. As a then 20 year old university student I could, and my father arranged for me to be the Broadmeadows Environment Committee or BECOMM representative.

By happy coincidence I recently came across the notes I wrote for BECOMM about this Moonee Ponds Creek Steering Committee first and second meetings, in April 1976. I found them very interesting, and will indulge myself a bit by reading a fair bit of them word for word.

FIRST MEETING - 8 April 1976.

At the first meeting of the Steering Committee, members were shown over the Board's activities, euphemistically dubbed improvements, from the bend below Gaffney Street northwards. This was a depressing journey, symbolised by the Board showing us at one stage a differently designed concrete arrangement they had used, suggesting it might be more environmentally harmonious! North of this we were shown other places in which MMBW activity is still to take place - John Pascoe Fawkner Reserve, Jacana Retarding Basin. Discussion centred around such items as the Board's fencing off of areas which it had concreted, their refusal to plant substantial vegetation on the creek banks for fear that this might retard floodwaters, and the problems associated with lack of open space surrounding the creek. Although the Board argued that for lack of space the creek could not be widened and must hence be concreted, it seemed that it had acquired the extra land by the time it carried out such works.....

(We were also shown) an MMBW Plan showing a straightening of the course of the creek. Although the natural bed of the creek could be retained, much of the scenic attraction and wildlife potential would be lost by such action. Taking this into consideration Tony Wilson and I urged that the creek course be left in as natural a state as possible."

SECOND MEETING 22 April 1976.

My concluding paragraph from this meeting said "Whilst we have achieved reconsideration of some detrimental Board plans, I think a good deal of resolution will need to be shown by Committee representatives to prevent the creek from being straightened in a manner which I would see as harmful". Unquote.

The Board of Works members wanted to know what our objection to the concrete was. We said, among other things, that it was ugly. They responded by proposing different designs for the concrete they said would look better and enable us to agree to more concreting.

We were not convinced, but they proceeded to trial different concrete designs, which can still be seen along the creek between Lebanon Reserve and the Strathmore Secondary College. After looking at the designs, we told the Board of Works that we didn't like any of them, and that in any event ugliness was only one of our objections - the concrete pretty much destroys the value of the Creek as a wildlife habitat and a wildlife corridor.

Reluctantly they gave up the dream of continuing the concreting. Back then the section of the Board of Works responsible for the Moonee Ponds Creek and other urban waterways was called "Main Drains", which is very revealing as to how the creek was viewed. The modern Melbourne Water is much more alert to its environmental value, and I retain the hope that one day we will see the concrete rolled back, from Strathmore North downstream, and the creek will regain its environmental and open space glory.

In 1983 the Victorian Government released a report from the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation which revealed that there was no evidence to support the theory that concrete lining was an effective way to

tackle flooding. Ironically Melbourne Water and Councils now work to try to stop run off from hard surfaces going rapidly into waterways, for fear of exacerbating flood events.

I thought you might find the extracts I read out relevant background to the work of the Friends over the past 30 years. They are certainly a window into my state of mind as a 20 year old and help explain why, after I became the Member for Pascoe Vale in the State Parliament in 1988 at the ripe old age of 33, I wanted to establish a Moonee Ponds Creek community group. I wanted to roll back the concrete lining and straightening of the creek.

There was another reason why I took on the Moonee Ponds Creek when others before me had not. The Moonee Ponds Creek, modest little waterway that it is, is a surprisingly strong community boundary between Melbourne's northern and western suburbs. It is a municipal boundary, a Federal electoral boundary, even a regional boundary between the northern and western service delivery arms of many organisations. It has tended to be at the edge of civic representatives areas of responsibility.

But the Pascoe Vale electorate straddled the Moonee Ponds Creek. I had lots of constituents on both sides of it. And because those boundaries were strong, they didn't have much experience of working together, or even much in common, but I found the Moonee Ponds Creek, and wanting to improve it, was something they did have in common, and it brought them together.

We called ourselves the Moonee Ponds Creek Association, and our first meeting was held in my then Electorate Office in Snell Grove Oak Park. The office was totally packed out, somewhat to my surprise, and I realised straight away that the Association was a going concern.

We did tree plantings, and of course 30 years later those trees are very well established. A few years ago I saw some large Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos in some of the trees we planted, and I felt very proud of our work. We did litter clean ups, and worked with the land managers on things like extending the shared path, getting rid of the cyclone wire fences and improving public access.

But the thing I remember most from that early period was the preparation of the Moonee Ponds Creek Concept Plan. We put a lot of effort into that Plan, and thought it was very good. I boldly declared that this Plan would not sit on a shelf gathering dust. Unfortunately that is exactly what it did. The change of State Government in 1992 didn't help, diminishing my political influence, scattering the Melbourne Water organisations so that the people responsible for the Moonee Ponds Creek were based in Hallam, dismissing Councils and replacing them with Commissioners, and forcing us to spend our political energy fighting rearguard battles to stop land along the Pascoe Vale Road link with the creek being sold off for housing.

I thought, we need someone who has as their day job the implementation of this plan. We need a Creek Co-ordinator. When elected Councils were returned in 1996 they came to our rescue - particularly Moreland. They agreed to fund a Co-ordinator. We set up a Moonee Ponds Creek Coordination Committee to act as that person's legal employer. To make the difference in roles clearer, we renamed the Moonee Ponds Creek Association as the Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek. It was a time of much activity and achievement.

Time doesn't allow me to detail all the things we've done, but I do love the Jacana Wetlands, which we helped Melbourne Water with the design of. They were constructed in around 2002. With much of Victoria in the grip of the Millenium Drought, in subsequent years I saw such unusual bird visitors to Melbourne as the Yellow-billed Spoonbill and Glossy Ibis at the Jacana Wetlands. Talk about build it and they will come - it is a great asset.

We've done plenty of other things too, but I should leave some room for others to comment as well rather than try to cover the field. I will say that we've put a lot of effort over the years into trying to maintain and expand the public open space in the creek valley, and to get agencies and land managers to see it as a linked, connected waterway and treat it that way.

We've fought housing proposals that would pave over our green spaces, and plans by government agencies to sell off public land to the highest bidder. The wins we had in recent years at Hopetoun Avenue Brunswick and Outlook Drive Glenroy have been satisfying, but I do admit to being irritated at our having to spend energy and political capital to get an outcome which in the twenty-first century should be too obvious for words.

There are many people who have contributed to our achievements over 30 years, and I cannot possibly acknowledge them all. But they have done great work. And I do want to mention a few. Kaye Oddie, our Secretary, has forbidden me from thanking her, which is really annoying, because she has been absolutely the driving force behind the Friends for years.

Anna Lanigan has been doing the Facebook and the Ponderings, and giving us a social media presence which enables us to have a much wider reach than we could otherwise. Both Kaye and Anna have been tireless, and key ingredients of our success.

Vince Aitkin and Frank Kinnersley showed up as a job lot, very much to our advantage. Vince has been the Treasurer, and it is a great comfort to have someone in charge of the books who knows what they're doing, cuts no corners, and is a fiscal conservative. Vince also played an important role in organising today's event.

Frank has been Vice-President, and put in a lot of effort to maintain our membership records, and is always a thoughtful contributor to our discussions and a reliable supporter of our events.

Tony Smith has been with us from the get go. Tony is an important source of corporate memory for us, he is seldom without a camera, helping us to record our works, and the Moonee Ponds Creek is only one of his open space interests, so he is able to provide valuable information about what is going on elsewhere in the western suburbs.

Alex Smart was a tower of strength in our early years, and it's great to see him here today - a key point of doing a 30th anniversary is to catch up with blasts from the past, so I'm very pleased you could make it, Alex.

But all good things must come to an end. At our recent AGM, I stepped down as President and Peter Scully has taken over from me. Kaye is stepping down as Secretary and Anna Lanigan is stepping down as Editor of Ponderings.

When I look around and see the young people active in local government like Alex English, Lori Arthur and Vince Andreana from Moreland, who absolutely get our vision, when I see Melbourne Water driving the Moonee Ponds Creek Collaboration, when I see the plans to remove a section of the concrete in Strathmore, when I see that the Moonee Ponds Creek has been identified by the Victorian Government as one of three Waterways of the West to be given priority treatment for legislative protection, when I see my successor Peter sending out emails seeking suggestions for Guest Speakers, I think that the future of the Creek is in good hands, and we can move on content and confident that the work will go on.

I feel like I've arrived at a destination after a very long journey. It's good to see you all here. Some of you have been here for most or even all of the journey; others are more recent. But for all that you've done, thank you.

When I wrote the Foreword to the 1992 Concept Plan I referred to the indignities it had suffered and described the Moonee Ponds Creek as the Cinderella of Melbourne's waterways. But now, when I see the Jacana Wetlands, or see all the cyclists, joggers and dog walkers on the path, or hear the lorikeets careering through the trees, I like to think our Cinderella is now having a ball.

Hon. Kelvin Thomson
President
Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek 1989-2019.