

Murder in The Basin



said Dr Annie Yoffa, a Melbourne practitioner, who has just returned from the USA.

She said that she had carried out psycho - dynamic research during her tour and this study enabled her to find the causes of genius.

Thus she was able to determine that Americans had a genius for machinery, Australians for freedom and self-confidence, and the Viennese for music.

The doctor was unable to explain psycho-dynamics."

One local resident recalls meeting Dr Yoffa, not in the bush of The Basin, but in the tea tree scrub at Mount Martha. Jan Salverson of Boronia remembers exploring with her young brother and finding a strange woman in an old tent...

Jan's story:

"Our family had a holiday house at Mt Martha and around 1952-53 one of my brothers and I used to spend many hours wandering through the tea tree scrub on the hills. There were narrow tunnels for miles through the scrub, just wide enough for one kid with the branches closing out the sky above.

On one particular day we followed the little creek instead, clambered up the bank and headed towards an area where the trees thinned out and then ceased at a rough track. From there almost to the peak of the hill, the land was a mass of strappy grass in front of us with a big mass of dark pine trees to the right.

Standing, staring at this new scene, we first spotted three tawny frogmouths perched low in a spindly sheoak, then went a bit further up the hill. It was not pleasant walking through the tussocky grass but we wanted to get to a higher spot to see more.

Not far from us, on the top of the hill, we saw what appeared to be the remains of an old ratty tent, shreds

blowing in the wind off the bay. Now this was definitely something to investigate! We approached hesitantly though as a tent there in that rather desolate place was a bit odd.

I don't quite know why we crept, but we did, and were scared witless when, with a rattle and rush, a bunch of rabbits shot out of the tent and streaked away. Recovering our breath we quietly stepped up and peered over into the tent to come eye to eye with a lady. She seemed old to us, but had kind eyes and a face that probably mirrored our own very startled expressions - it was startling to see a person tied under a tarp onto an old stretcher, dressed in an old army great coat. I vaguely recall a shapeless felt hat over greying hair, fingerless mittens and masses of peanuts in her lap which she shelled non-stop. The floor was a carpet of peanut shells and shredded newspapers - her occupation to keep fingers active and warm.

Dr Yoffa introduced herself and said she knew someone was around as her friends the rabbits had left in a hurry. We talked about how we loved the bush and exploring. She understood our childish curiosity as she herself was trying to explore the heavens at night, and would keep trying to study the stars. Dr Yoffa believed she could commune with spirits from other, distant worlds.

Sometimes Mum and Dad and my brothers and I would wander down the steep drive of our holiday house with torches and a Tilley lamp, cross the road and walk through the bush on the cliff top to a grassy spot. We would turn off the lights and enjoy the feeling of isolation with the whole bay in front and the bush behind. In the dark the froth of the waves breaking on the rocks below was an iridescent glow. The stars became blindingly bright. As our eyes and ears tuned in to the sounds and silence and the look of familiar things in darkness, we would often hear, floating from high on the Mt Martha hill behind us, the thin high sounds, poignant and melodic, of a voice reaching for the stars. Although we did know it was Dr Yoffa still it was an eerie, spine-shivery sound.

Our family were shocked and sad some years later

My thanks to all who contributed their memories or discoveries to this sad story.

The life of a very remarkable and accomplished woman, Dr Annie Yoffa, ended in the bush at The Basin on 18 March 1959 at the hands of a deranged young man, drawn to her campsite by an article in the *Truth* newspaper. There is some debate over the exact location of the victim's campsite but it now appears likely that it was off the North side of Mountain Highway (rear of Inverness Avenue) between Alamein and Tobruk Avenues (possibly where the last property between the back of the current houses and the highway still remains in private ownership). Reports variously state that she camped there for a "few weeks" to "about ten years".

Annie Yoffa was a highly qualified psychiatrist and surgeon with degrees in medicine and surgery from London University and a Master of Arts degree from Cornell University in the USA. The National Library of Australia holds five of Annie Yoffa's publications, including two collections of her papers between 1929 and 1949; *In the Land of Israel*: a futuristic novel, [New York]: A. Yoffa, 1929; *The Real Thing*: adventures in the Australian bush by Annie Yoffa, New York (N.Y.): Martin Press, 1929; *Sightseeing in Wonderland (The miracle)* by Annie Yoffa, New York, The Martin Press [c1929]

Born in 1891 or 1892, the daughter of prominent hosiery manufacturers, a family of high achievers, Annie Yoffa was a great lover of the Australian bush and also studied and travelled extensively overseas. Beyond that I have been unable to discover much of her early life. In 1949 she returned from studies in the United States and was interviewed by the press:

Canberra Times Saturday 19 February 1949

"Australian Genius for Freedom

SYDNEY. Friday.

Australians had a genius for freedom and self-confidence,

The Age - 3 April 1962

Statement Alleged About Death of Woman Doctor

A DETECTIVE told the Criminal Court yesterday that Victor Maxwell Jones, 28, gold prospector, of Greenvale, had cried during an interview concerning the murder of Dr. Annie Yoffa, 68, at The Basin, on February 18, 1959.

Jones has pleaded not guilty to a charge of murdering Dr. Yoffa.

Detective James Henry of Fern Tree Gully said Jones had asked him to wipe his eyes. Jones said: "My hands have touched Satan and I must not touch anything else with them."

Puls said he first saw the accused at Fern Tree Gully Police Station where he had been brought there by four men.

He locked Jones in a cell where he immediately took off his clothes, pushed them outside the cell and wrapped himself in a blanket.

Jones asked for something to read and Puls gave him the station Bible, which Jones later tore to pieces.

"Forces of Evil"

Detective Puls continued: "Later in the morning I took him into the office, where I questioned him in the presence of Detective William Hower, of the Homicide Squad.

"Jones asked me if I believed in God and when I said 'Yes' he told me to write down quickly what he had to say."

Detective Puls then read a statement which he said he took from Jones at the time.

The statement read: "My mother died when I was three. She protected me until then. After she died the forces of evil took me.

"On February 18 I parked my car in Richmond and took a taxi to Burwood where I got another taxi to take me to Sassafras.

Visit to Camp

"The taxi driver helped me find the old lady at the side of the road who had been written up.

"When I came to the old woman's camp, she was waving a stick to ward me off and carrying on like a mad woman.

"After a while this madness passed off and she said to me; 'You are all right. You are not insane.

"I told her she was the best psychiatrist in the world and that she could help me. But she again got

annoyed and I told her I would have to strike her dumb until the morning.

"She said, 'Lay down, my son and sleep.' I lay down a few yards from her tent but I could not sleep.

"She again got abusive and I called on all my powers of God and I silenced her."

"She was not a woman, she was the devil."

Jones had asked if he could have a shower but had declined to use the soap as he said it had been made by the devil.

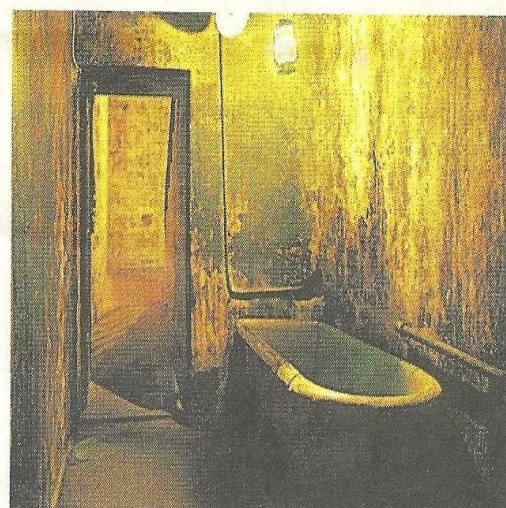
Jones was later taken to the City Watch House wearing only the blanket.

The next day Jones refused to leave his cell and the court was convened in the cell, when Jones was charged with the murder. Surprisingly, he was released on bail but a few days later he was certified insane.

Having been certified insane soon after his arrest, Victor Jones was committed to the Ararat Lunatic Asylum for the criminally insane, also known as J Ward (now closed). There he became a "trusty" and was allowed out on a Saturday afternoon, unsupervised, to go fishing! There is no record of who was actually surprised when he failed to return after one such excursion in January 1961, sparking one of Victoria's biggest manhunts. He was recaptured after 27 days and placed in maximum security.

At trial on 4 April 1962 Jones was found not guilty by reason of insanity and returned to J Ward - where his 'trusty' status was not resumed. Nothing more could be gleaned about his eventual fate. Thus ended the saga of The Basin's best known murder and the sad tale of the remarkable Annie Yoffa.

John Mortimore



Underground bathroom - J Ward

J Ward Website:

www.jward.ararat.net.au

to read that this kind woman, who was prepared to live in extraordinary hardship for her research, was brutally murdered here in the Dandenongs.

(Dr Yoffa was ahead of her times it seems as, for some years past, the US government has had a satellite in space broadcasting music, hoping to attract and record some response.)"

Jan Salverson

Long time local Gary Binding also remembers meeting the strange doctor, this time in the bush at The Basin where she camped for up to 10 years. Gary was a keen cyclist back in the 1950s and believes he's ridden up the "1 in 20" (Mountain Highway) about 4,000 times. In about 1957 he met Dr Annie Yoffa at her camp about 50 metres down from the road in the bush. She was a strange but friendly person who he thought was a "bit of a nutter". She was there to study philosophy and the seasons she told him. Her camp was littered with the shredded remains of many newspapers, which she would tear up obsessively to keep her fingers supple. She demonstrated the different sounds made by tearing paper - one sheet or two, slow or fast. Apparently crippled at that stage, she would shuffle around the camp on her backside.

Kerry McIntyre's aunts, who lived for a long time in the area, told her that the doctor was in her 50s and well known for her ability to mimic the bird calls of the native birds of the area.

Reported in the Age - 8 October 1958, two young gold prospectors staked a 20 acre gold mining claim on a 354 acre farm at Bulla, North West of Melbourne. One of them was Victor Maxwell Jones, 25, of Green Vale (now Greenvale, north of Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine). The farm owners, not surprisingly, opposed the granting of a mining lease on their land and, by all accounts, the young men were rather confused about exactly what it was they were seeking. The case was adjourned and the claim later abandoned. Victor Jones next brush with fame, or notoriety, brought him out to the bush off Mountain Highway in The Basin.

Olive McPherson, who lived in Sassafras at the time, recalls being stopped by police in Mountain Highway on her way to work in Mitcham. They were told there had been a murder, an old woman who lived in a tent and studied the environment. She had been killed by a man "in his thirties" who claimed that God told him to do it.