

**WOOLLAHRA COUNCIL PLAQUE SCHEME
PLACEMENT OF PLAQUE FOR JOHN FAIRFAX
"GINAHGULLA", GINAHGULLA ROAD, BELLEVUE HILL
FEBRUARY 16, 2017**

JOHN B FAIRFAX, AO

Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, family. You know why we are here. The Mayor has outlined some of the history of a man who was a resident of the Woollahra precinct, and also a great Australian.

Forgive me for bringing in a personal note – a few lines written in The Countrywoman newspaper just after my christening at Dural in March 1942 when the world was at war – “A small party of relatives attended the Christening and had afternoon tea afterwards at “Wanawong”, the home of Mr and Mrs Hubert Fairfax, at Castle Hill, where the staff also joined in the rejoicing and in expressing deepest good wishes for health and happiness to this young pioneer of a new world era, who is facing circumstances, as unknown and even more difficult than those which met his illustrious ancestor when Australia was on the threshold of her nationhood.”

Well, you will know that in September 1838, John Fairfax came ashore from the Lady Fitzherbert accompanied by his wife Sarah and their four children. They set foot in a Colonial settlement of 25,000 people. They had virtually no money, they had nowhere to live, they knew nothing of what lay ahead. Sarah had been unwell for most of the four-month voyage. She gave birth to Richard on board. Richard died two months after their arrival. It was an era of uncertainty; of bushrangers; where transportation of convicts would soon be suspended; an era where some people persisted despite the hardships while others, such as Charles Darwin, were less tolerant. Darwin wrote in his diary of 1839 about his Sydney departure three years earlier: ‘Farewell Australia, you are a rising infant and doubtless some day will reign a great princess in the South; but you are too great and ambitious for affection, yet not great enough for respect; I leave your shores without sorrow or regret.’

By contrast all my mother had to worry about in 1942 was a few bombs being dropped in Darwin and a couple of Japanese submarines in Sydney Harbour. The bravery of those who came to Sydney with a purpose in those early days, is unimaginable to us who have benefitted from their pioneering spirit, their enterprise, their resilience.

Let us visualise what John Fairfax, the bankrupt newspaperman from Leamington in Warwickshire, would be thinking today standing on this footpath outside the residence that housed his family and where he died in 1877.

He would reflect on the tough times personally and professionally. He would proudly recall returning to England to repay all his debts even though he was not obliged to do so.

He would be proud of the way The Sydney Morning Herald evolved, becoming one of the great newspapers of the world. His Christian attitudes and adherence to conservative ways, would allow him to be amused by the fact that the paper became affectionately known as Granny, after the light-hearted column that appeared as Column 8 and recently celebrated its 70th anniversary.

He would be amused to know that eight years after his death in 1877, his son James Reading, was among the inaugural directors of the Perpetual Trustee Company. They had difficulty in deciding who should be chairman, so it was determined that he who weighed the greatest should take the chair. James Reading Fairfax was the first chairman of the Perpetual Trustee company!

He would be proud that five generations of his direct family had been involved in maintaining the high standards he had set for the Herald. He would be greatly saddened that one of that generation had been instrumental in bringing to an end 150 years of Fairfax proprietorship. But the Herald itself has survived for 186 years – so we have to acknowledge that's pretty good, even for a Granny. He would be grateful for that.

He would be proud of Sydney as a modern city on the best harbour in the world. He would accept as important the indigenous community, for "his religion was as broad and as tolerant as it was heartfelt and sincere". His mission today would be as it was in the 19th Century – "the mission of the press is a high and sacred one, and he who makes a bad use of its power and influence commits high treason against society."

John Fairfax was renown for his care of all his employees and their families, a tradition that extended through the generations. For example, in 1882, his son Sir James Reading Fairfax established the Boys Brigade in Surry Hills to provide facilities for boys selling newspapers on the streets. Today that organisation – still supported by the Fairfax family – is known as the Girls & Boys Brigade and continues to support disadvantaged children.

He would reflect on that day of February 8, 1841 when he and Charles Kemp became joint proprietors of the Herald, and he would acknowledge that the same day 176 years later that a memorial service was held for James Oswald Fairfax, the last family chairman of the Sydney Morning Herald.

The story of the Herald and the association of the Fairfax family through all those years is an incredible tribute to the foundations laid by the original John Fairfax and which set the standards for other family members.

He would of course be amazed today to see our modes of transport. No more the phaeton, pulled by horses, and driven by a drunk reinsman, which overturned killing his daughter, Emily. But aeroplanes fly overhead, and electric cars with self-steering glide silently by. He would be amused at the level of casual business attire, but encouraged by a resurgence of facial hair which he had in abundance. He would be tempted to comment on our national debt and the state of our leadership, but he would recognise this is not a political event and refrain.

Although no honour was bestowed upon John Fairfax, he was surely worthy of one, but he would have been humbly satisfied with the tribute paid to him by his employees who said: "the effect of his influence, both on the Press and the status of the printing trade, we see how much both have been indebted to his liberality, to his insight, and to his conscientious desire to aim at the realisation of a high ideal".

He was a resident of this municipality, and standing here today outside his house, he would look upon the plaque with modesty and pay tribute to the Councillors for their consideration, acknowledge the family who share the occasion, and be just a little proud that five generations later, it was a John Fairfax uttering a few words on behalf of the family he bore.