

ANDREW ALLEN'S CURIOUS CAMPBELLTOWN PODCAST INTERVIEW WITH GARY SEDDON ON

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AA Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of Campbelltown Library's podcast Curious Campbelltown. My name is Andrew Allen.

Eccentricity, I recently read someone describing it as:

"Usually eccentric people are very intelligent and or creative. They also are often loners. These people love their own company, value their home lives and revere personal space. Paradoxically they have a strong desire to express themselves freely when they choose to."

This last line particularly sums up perfectly today's subject. Someone that I have had a long fascination about. His name is Tom Cooper. My special guest today knew Tom Cooper and has fond memories of this wonderful eccentric character. I would like to welcome to Curious Campbelltown Gary Seddon. Hello Gary.

GS Hello Andrew.

AA I really appreciate you coming in. I know you've got some health issues so it is much appreciated.

GS No problem, my pleasure mate. I love to speak about Tom and Menangle Park I hold them very dear and close to my heart. My family has lived in Menangle Park since the 20s when the village was first brought about. They moved here about the same time as what Tom did.

AA I know you've got a passion about the place. So we have something in common we both love Tom Cooper. What I might do just for a little while is just give a very basic background about our subject today Tom Cooper. I know a lot of people won't have heard of him.

He lived at Menangle Park from about the 1920s to the 1960s. He died in 1968 having moved there from Queensland. Tom lived in a tin shanty that he named Dome Michael with a dirt floor and this house was condemned by Council and he was ordered to pull it down. He was on seven and a half acres so occupying that land was also a massive tin shed, barbed wire and wire netting. But the amazing thing about the place was the variety of animals on the property. He had hundreds of different kinds of animals from guinea fowls to goats and emus and heaps of birds and he was also a breeder of homing pigeons. So one day Tom received a letter from Council informing him that he had only thirty days to pull down his first shanty house and outbuildings. So he reluctantly followed the order and he called them vultures and wasn't very impressed.

GS That relates to the letterhead of the Council at the time. I think it was a swan, a black swan and he described that as a vulture or a hawk.

AA That's right then he built a new house. Now what Tom became most noted for was his love of colours so much so that his clothes, he had a dray or cart that was colourful and even his house was painted in the brightest colours. He was determined to make it as he called it an eye-stopper. A lady called Melba Thomas was his neighbour and wrote an article in the 1963/64 issue of the Literary Revue called The Eye-Stopper and it is from this article that I became familiar with Tom. So Gary how well did you know Tom Cooper?

GS I knew him fairly well. I was only fairly young at the time. Described in the story is the entrances to his property. There were three streets. He had an entrance on Cummins Road, he had an entrance on Payten Road and then Racecourse Avenue. I can remember the entrance on Cummins Road reasonably clear, I was only about three or four at the time. I remember all the other entrances but the entrance on Cummins Road was sort of the first to disappear because he sold that section of land when it was pulled down. I knew Mrs Thomas very well, she was a lovely lady. The entire Thomas family I can't speak highly enough of. Just a wonderful, wonderful person.

AA Did you have much to do with Tom Cooper? Did you know him at all? I know you would have been fairly young.

GS In 68 I was only about nine or ten. I knew him then. The thing I remember about Tom was his blue eyes. He had really bright blue eyes and he was a sassy character the way he spoke he was a real bushy.

AA He had a really slow drawl didn't he?

GS And like you said he was an eccentric. I've read a book called Jonathon Livingston Seagull and watched the movie about it with Neil Diamond in it, I don't know if you've seen it.

AA I know the one you mean.

5 mins

GS Jonathon Livingston Seagull was a seagull that didn't want to comply with the pack. He wanted to be the fastest seagull on the planet. I think Tom was a bit like Jonathon Livingston Seagull and he would have loved Jonathon being a seagull of course because of his patience with birds, pigeons and such. Actually my grandparents lived in Mrs Thomas's house. They rented it before they purchased their house. My grandmother had a set against Tom and the reason for that is she had my mum as a baby then and she had her in the pram out on the veranda. One of Tom's goats had got out and decided that the pram was another goat and started to try and head but the pram and set mum off crying and set the pram off the veranda and Nan was never really a fan of Tom's. She had this saying, she would say mad as Tom Cooper.

AA The rest of Menangle Park, do you remember what they thought of him?

GS Everyone loved him, everyone liked him. I don't say they hated him. The community at Menangle Park was so tight. It was the best community ever. Everyone helped each other, they all knew each other. With the progress hall out there, we would all meet and have parties and dances and stuff like that. It's just a wonderful lot of big hearted, good kind people. Specially the older ones that have lived in the area right from the start and Tom himself you've got to remember when Tom was born, Australia was at war in the Boer War. Tom lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression so he was fairly tough, he was resilient but he was an Aussie through and through and a bushie through and through with his drawl.

AA He spent a bit of time in the outback didn't he I believe in Queensland.

GS During the war he was stationed on Thursday Island I think and he was a signalman in the Pigeon Corp which was quite important because at the time Australia was just gripped with panic in the 40s/42 and just after because of Port Moresby being under attack and Pearl Harbour had just happened and the midget submarines in Sydney Harbour. There was a bit of a panic back then.

AA What do you remember about Tom's first buildings, the shanty and the outbuildings and the signs?

GS They were pretty wild. There were chains on the gates just hanging from poles and all sorts of scrap metal hanging, cast iron bits hanging from the poles and they would clunk in the wind. There were all manner of signs saying private property keep out and room for stiffs only and all sorts of weird stuff like that. I think that was Tom's undoing because that was the sort of thing that attracted the Council's attention more than his humpy. It was more the gates and the barbed wire.

AA I wrote down the sign about the stiffs. I love the way it is described. It said Dead Man's Gulch keep out only vacancies for stiffs.

GS That's the one yeah.

AA I think that it is hilarious. What about the second colourful house. What did you think of that as a child?

GS Everyone loved it. People would drive out from Sydney. There's a story even a guy from Darwin called out to have a look and the trains, they were the funniest. The ten o'clock and the five o'clock trains they were the two trains that stopped at Menangle Park. The train would stop so that the last carriage lined up with the small platform so they were only very small platforms out there in the day. So the front of the train would almost line up with the front of Tom's house so there would be people hanging out every window of the train trying to get a look at the house and then go. It attracted people from far and wide.

10 mins

AA Melba Thomas wrote about Tom's house and described it this way when she first saw it after returning from being away. I love how she described it. I might just read it.

"We found that Tom had painted every fence and veranda post, every panel in the front door, every sheet of fibro or roofing iron in a different colour. There was every shade of yellow from lemon to marigold, blue from maradona to royal, green from odeneal to pine, pink from blush to rose, red from coral to scarlet and then mauve, violet, silver and gold. Besides home mixed colours that defied naming. Below the veranda on either side of the fluorescent yellow front steps were cartwheels six of them all told with every spoke a different colour. Nine discs from the old plough coated thickly with nine colours were suspended by wire on either side of the ubiquitous skulls and horns which were securely fastened to the tops of the veranda posts."

It's just amazing, I just love the way ...

GS It's such an accurate description. There were large poplar trees either side of his front yard and there were wires that would hang from the poplar trees with like she said skulls and all sorts of bits and pieces.

AA So people would drive out on the weekend.

GS In the story it actually said that Tom ended up giving up work. Tom worked in the city at a hospital as a groundsman and I think that's where he met his wife as well. He ended up giving up work. He had some problems with his feet, bunions I think, and he gave up work because of the bunions and he wanted to spend more time at home because all these strangers were coming and hanging around and looking at the place. He was a bit worried about his possessions and his new domicile.

AA I was reading his obituary. One of the reasons why he painted his house in different colours was because someone couldn't find it once. He said just to make sure that never happened again he painted his house so you couldn't miss it.

GS I don't know about that Andrew. I think it was more to stick it to the Council. It says in the story I think that he painted it a colour and the vulture and the hawk would be there for hours quarrelling?? through all their laws and regulations about what colour the house should be painted and I thought that pretty amusing from old Tom.

AA And he never heard from them after that.

GS No, they didn't bother. That's a thing about Menangle Park. We were always sort of left to ourselves out there. Not every street was sealed, not every street had kerb and guttering, we didn't even have a bus shelter for quite a number of years, only in the last few years that we even got a bus shelter. We had the station and that was lovely, I loved the station. The station out there was actually part of North Menangle Station. What they did when they built Menangle Park station they pulled down North Menangle and they cut the waiting shed in half. So one half of the waiting shed at Menangle Park was half of the shed from North

Menangle and the other side was the other half. I always remember we had a red lantern on the station and we had a red hand signal so we could get the trains to stop. Many a time they didn't stop because they wouldn't brake in time and then the train would have to reverse back.

AA How long has the North Menangle Station been gone?

GS That's been gone quite a time. North Menangle Station was the end of the line before the Menangle Railway Bridge was built. In Menangle Park there is still a house that was from North Menangle Station. It's one of the original buildings and it was moved to Menangle Park for someone to live in. It's really a nice old place and it's the same colour as what the station would be. It's in Cummins Road if you're ever out there look out for it.

AA Getting back to Tom do you remember his clothes?

GS He was a bushy and he was a very eccentric man. He had a rope belt, a bit like the Beverley Hillbillies I think. He would tie his pants up with a rope, he had parrot feathers in his hat. After he painted his house his emerald hat had a bit of speckle of colour onto it. He was a nice old bloke but as eccentric as they come.

AA You said you knew Melba Thomas and the Thomas family.

GS There were two lots of the Thomas's lived in Menangle Park. Melba's husband and his brother had lived in Menangle Park before the war. Melba and the other brother's wife moved to Menangle Park when they got married. The other brother lived on top of the hill in Cummins Road and they had grapes. Most of my family and relatives out there - My grandmother and my great aunt lived out there and they used to pick grapes at the Thomas's.

15 mins

It would be like 45 degrees up in the tin shed where they would pick the grapes and sort them. I will never forget one year they were all wags my family. It was so hot and Malcolm, Mr Thomas had gone away for a short period of time and dad decided it was too hot so they jumped in the well naked to cool off and Mrs Thomas reappeared so they had to get out of the well. They were funny like that, very Australian and down to earth apart from the GM. They all lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression.

AA They did breed them tough didn't they in those sort of places? So there is nothing left of Tom's property or his buildings now is there?

GS Yes, the house is still there.

AA The house is still there is it?

GS It's all white now plain and boring. It's a country style house with a veranda round it with a pointed roof.

AA Right, I must go and have a look. I just assumed it was knocked down.

GS No, No it's still there mate.

AA I don't remember seeing any colourful houses but its all white you said.

GS They painted it yeah.

AA Ok what a shame.

GS It was a shame when it was painted. It was like a landmark that we lost. The same as Tom passed, a person that we lost along with other characters and there were lots of them out there.

AA That's what I was just about to ask because I read about a lot of characters from Menangle. There is something about Menangle and Menangle Park that breeds characters it seems.

GS One at Menangle that I remember really well. His name was Johnny and he was a midget and he used to ride his bike. He would always be down at the bridge over the railway line. He would ride his bike there to watch the trains, he loved trains that was his thing. I think he might have had Asbergers or something like that and trains were his focus. He was a really nice fellow. He has passed away now unfortunately.

AA It is an interesting town. I've read about a lady called Black Nellie. This is going back in the 1800s. She was an aboriginal lady and she used to walk around with two dresses no matter whether it was hot or cold. A lady called Granny Fowler and one called Billy Baldach and then Tom Cooper and then the one that you have thought about. It's an interesting place.

GS I am an avid fisherman and that's come from living on the river. Up and down the river from virtually down at the coal wash Glenlee end all the way to Douglas Park I pretty well know back to front. It was our turf when we were kids. I know of Archie's Crossing that's where one of the Macarthur Onslows from Gilbulla tried to build a bridge over the river so he could get to Appin quicker. That's an interesting site, I love that site. There's another one of those further up the river towards Douglas Park and there's also another section on the river I quite like and we call it the haunted section. I believe that's where the Aborigines went after the massacre at Appin, that's my impression my feeling anyway. That section of river it's just like a haunted area.

AA Do you feel that when you're around there? Do you get that feeling?

20 mins

GS Yes most definitely. One of the reasons why Andrew that I came up with that story. I had kind of known Tom and all the rest of it and I had seen the house in person, I had seen the gates in person but I never read Mrs Thomas's story. I had never ever seen a copy of it. I began a lot of research out at Menangle Park into the military history. Now you have probably seen out there recently the memorial to the Australian Light Horse. Soldiers and troops of the Light Horse trained out there were in the charge of Beersheba which is a very historic and Australian event as we all know.

So I've been doing a lot of research into the Light Horse. I know most of the relics from the camp out there in the village, there are a lot of cement slabs located across the village that were buildings from the Light Horse camp. During my research I joined the Australian Light Horse Association which was an internet website for the Light Horse, a forum. I learnt to research on that forum. I found lots and lots of pictures of soldiers in the camp which is one of the things I dearly wanted. I found from my research that there was a two storey canteen building built at Menangle Park and I had never ever heard of it or seen it and for me to have all my life out there and not know where this building was sort of blew me away and I wanted to find it. Anyway I asked another lady from out there her name is Nola Markitt another lovely, lovely lady who had lived there since the village had been built. Her maiden name was Lynn and they were actually neighbours to Tom as well where the new house is on the southern side. Nola gave me a magazine with the story that you have on your website now and after reading that story I saw the dimensions of all the galvanised iron and building materials and timber and stuff. I thought to myself I'll bet you this has come from the canteen. The building was quite large, it had six billiard tables and it was two storey. I found a photograph from a soldier's family that were from Wollongong and I looked at the photo and studied it how I always do because I like to look at the photos and look at the landmarks, the lay of the land so I can recognise where that photograph has been taken.

AA Because that never changes does it?

GS No, the lay of the land never changes, you can pinpoint exactly where the photo is taken from the lay of the land. Anyway I brought the photo up on the computer and I enlarged it a bit and when I enlarged it I got a bit of a shock. There was a young lady in a riding outfit mixed amongst the soldiers. I thought oh wow I will enlarge this a bit again and when I enlarged it again in the very background of the photo I saw a two storey tin building and it was virtually where Tom's front gate was on Cummins Road. That sparked with me that that's where Tom has got all the tin and it is mentioned in the story that there was a sword in the humpy as well.

AA I remember reading about that.

GS It said Bill Smith built his new house. Bill Smith knew me quite well and I knew Bill's daughter and all his family. Bill's daughter told me she had actually been in Tom's humpy and I was quite jealous when she told me that. She said that she had seen the swords and she had seen other military things hanging on the wall.

AA Paraphernalia

GS Yes, paraphernalia that's the word thank you. So I was really jealous when she told me that she had been in there.

AA I'm jealous

GS She has passed away now unfortunately.

AA I try to imagine in my head what it would be like from the description that Melba used.

GS I can picture it from Melba, the Dill wood fired stove in there and all the other bits and pieces.

AA That's fantastic he was such a character. OK Gary it's been great talking to you about a person that we both have an affection for.

GS Most definitely. Me being a Seddon I think from the website that I was a researcher but my family on both sides my father's family and my mother's family I go back to J P Seddon in Campbelltown which was in the 1850s/60s somewhere like that.

AA Joseph Pickles Seddon wasn't it.

GS Yeah, he had the cordial factory in Campbelltown in Short Street. I've got a couple of his bottles. His bottles are fairly collectable.

When the Light Horse went out to Menangle Park from Liverpool or Casula it was due to the termites and problems they had at Liverpool. The camp was moved out of there to get the soldiers away from the pubs and the trains didn't stop out there so it was difficult for them to cause mayhem. There is a file in the National Archives where the soldiers were in trouble because they were walking over the Menangle Railway Bridge to get to the shop at Menangle. That's no mean feat let me tell you. I have been up on the top of there just to the start of the railway bridge and it's not a good place to be so I wouldn't like to be further out in the middle when the trains are coming. Interestingly enough, that's another thing I want to mention, on the railway bridge it's probably descendants of Thomas Pigeon because there are two holes that run down either side of the top of the railway bridge and they are full of pigeons. They are probably descendants from Thomas.

AA They probably are yeah. OK Gary well we might finish off with that. I have really enjoyed talking to you and thanks for being part of Curious Campbelltown.

GS Yeah for sure.

AA Thank you Gary.