

Utopian Dreamer

George Henry Blunden 1855- 1947
Amelia Biggin-Pitts d1902

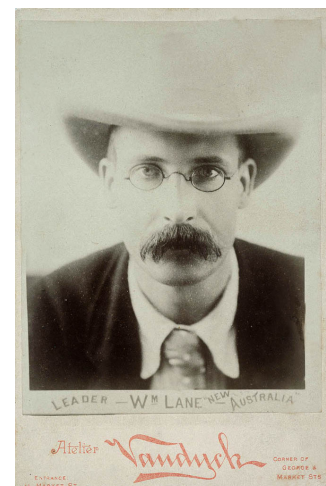
George Henry Blunden
c1880 and his wife Amelia
Jane Biggin-Pitts. Source:
John Coleman



The New Australia Cooperative Association

Australia in the early 1890s experienced a severe drought followed by an equally severe economic depression and the resultant famous shearers' strike and a maritime workers' strike. In 1893, a group of Australians, dissatisfied with conditions at home, set out to create a socialist commune in Paraguay. A group called 'The New Australia Co-operative Association', led by journalist William Lane, managed to gain support and finances from many like-minded men and women wishing to live free from the inequalities experienced in Australian life.

One of these supporters was George Henry Blunden, born in Chilwell Geelong, eldest son of **Elizabeth Fowles** and **Henry Blunden**. George was married to Amelia Biggin-Pitts and by 1893, had a family of six children ranging from 6 months to 13 years of age. After many moves around Victoria and New South Wales, they were living at Albury, New South Wales, where George was a baker and a member of the Single Tax Party (who believed the only tax levied should be on land values). It was from Albury that George and his family, with several other Single Tax members and their families, decided to join William Lane's first contingent of emigrants to Paraguay, and so travel to Sydney where they would board the *Royal Tar*, a ship purchased by the Association, to take them to their new colony. The financial commitment for each member was £10 initial membership, and a further £50 to embark on the *Royal Tar*, plus each man was to give all his capital over to the Association, if emigrating.



William Lane, leader
of New Australia 1893.
Source: State Library of
New South Wales

Why Paraguay?

The Paraguayan government had been very keen to gain new immigrants after recently losing half its population from wars with her three neighbours: Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Paraguay desperately needed more people to build their economy and welcomed the immigration of the Australians. Leading members of The New Australia Co-operative Association had been to Paraguay to search for land on which to establish a new egalitarian society. They eventually bought an area of 75,000 hectares (partially inhabited by the mainly dispossessed native Guarani people) from the Paraguayan government. The land was described as having open pastures and wooded areas, all well-watered and most suitable for farming.

On the Sunday morning of July 16th, 1893, the Blundens were amongst 220 hopeful and excited emigrants from various parts of Australia, ready to set sail for Paraguay. The group consisted of 80 men, (43 being unmarried), 40 women (including many teenage wives), and the rest were children. The crossing of the Tasman Sea was very rough, however after New Zealand, weather was fine until they passed the Cape Horn after which the temperature dropped very suddenly. This was followed by several stormy days avoiding collisions with icebergs until they sailed north past the Falklands, to arrive at Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, on Monday September 11th. At some time during this journey, the Blundens youngest child Frederick, still an infant, died and was buried at sea.



The Blundens prior to leaving for Paraguay in 1893. Source: John Coleman



Passengers (which included the Blundens) on the Royal Tar's first voyage 1893. Source: State Library of New South Wales



The Australian barque *Royal Tar* anchored off Garden Island, Sydney Harbour on July 15th 1893, the day before she sailed for South America. Source: Port Adelaide Nautical Museum

Trouble in 'New Australia'

From Montevideo, the 'New Australians' had to make their way to land-locked Paraguay. Transport consisted of riverboats along the Parana, Paraguay and Tebicuary rivers to the Paraguayan capital Asuncion, then train to Villarrica and finally bullock-drawn carts to their new land. On arrival at 'New Australia' camp was set up at a once inhabited place called Las Ovejas. There was much work to be done – building shelters, clearing land, and planting crops- mainly: sweet potatoes, mandioca, French beans, melons and Irish potatoes, the latter being the only unsuccessful crop.

However, all was not well. Many were not happy with William Lane's leadership and management in general. But also, although initially agreed upon, Lane had set rigid rules regarding abstinence from alcohol, and not fraternizing with the locals, in particular, the local women. With so many single men in the party, these rules were soon proven to be unrealistic. After only a few months, these grievances and the many pressures of establishing a subsistence living in a new land, eventually led to outright rebellion by a few, resulting in three members being expelled. This created a split in the commune into two groups – the 'Royalists' who supported Lane, and the seceders, the 'Rebels'.

Blunden 'Rebels'

The expulsions also provided an opportunity for the seceders to leave the commune. The Blundens were among this group of 30 men, 17 wives and 34 children who left the commune by December. These families were given a small payment (which was all the embryonic commune could afford as there were no dividends from production as yet) to leave the commune, as well as free transport to Villarrica, and some free land offered by the Paraguayan government who was keen to retain the Australians. According to Gavin Souter¹, the Blundens received \$900 (Paraguayan) or £30. Many of the seceders wanted to travel back to Australia on the return trip of the *Royal Tar* but were refused.

Colonia Gonzalez

So, what did the Blundens do? After reaching Villaricca, like most other seceders, they accepted a 60-acre allotment from the government at a place called Colonia Gonzalez. A fellow seceder, William Wotherspoon, wrote on February 7th 1894:

'The land is all monte (or scrub land on a hill). We had to take it or starve, for there was nothing else for us to do.'²

The government also gave them loans in the form of a 12-month allowance '.. of fifty cents each a day per man and wife, twenty-five cents each for children under ten years of age, and fifty cents for children over ten'³ (50 Paraguayan cents equalled about 4 pence).

Wotherspoon's wife also wrote on February 27th:

'Talk about mosquitoes, and fleas, and hornets, and all sorts of vermin! There is no peace night or day, and the heat is far more intense than in Australia. We feel it more. It is a moist heat instead of a dry heat. And there is a sand flea that gets into everyone's feet and festers and makes the feet awful painful, leaving holes that are sore. Every one of us reckons they have taken a very foolish step in coming here, and we would all like to get back.'⁴

Life in Paraguay was proving to be extremely hard. Farming their largely unproductive land was difficult and the local economy was weak. They could not make a living this way and men could not leave their families, who were now destitute and starving, to search for work elsewhere. By January the next year there were many appeals to the various governments and people of the Australian colonies, seeking funds to help the desperate seceders return home. With poor communications, information attempting to assist the seceders, was not received, and some information, it was asserted, had been deliberately kept from them by the British Consul.



Some of the 'New Australia' settlers in Paraguay c1893.
Source: State Library of New South Wales



An early banknote for New Australia in 1895. Source: auspostalhistory.com

New Australia Cooperative Settlement, Certificate of Membership. Source: University of Sydney

Desperate to return home

By October of 1894 the Blundens may have been among the 20 families that went to Buenos Aires under the impression that there would be assistance from the Australian government. The *Brisbane Courier* of January 29th 1895, stated:

'On their arrival in a penniless condition they were lodged and fed from Friday till Monday by the sailors of the steamers Glenbank and La Navada, then in port. Afterwards they were taken in hand by the English Benevolent Society and the Salvation Army.'

We don't know how long the Blundens were in Buenos Aires, however, their luck must have changed as they found a way to return to Australia. *The Advertiser* (Adelaide) reported on January 31st 1895:

'BACK FROM NEW AUSTRALIA.

By the barque *Embleton*, which arrived from Buenos Ayres on Wednesday (writes our shipping reporter), arrived an instalment of people who are glad to return from New Australia to old Australia after an absence, in some cases, of 18 months. It appears that a vessel named the *Bolivia* sailed for Melbourne, taking as many of the returning colonists as possible, and when the *Embleton* was ready for sea, proposals were made to Captain Grunow to bring on another batch of 22 souls, consisting of Mr. and Mrs.

Blunden and five children, Mr. and Mrs. Burnett and four children, Mr. and Mrs. Molesworth and three children, and Mrs. Dewitt. Having regard for the unfortunate position of the people the master brought them all over for £50, provided the men worked the ship. The people have suffered severely. Some of them left Queensland and New South Wales by the *Royal Tar*, and one very intelligent woman gave a sad account of the hardships endured. It was expected that the vessel would be ordered on, in which case the people will be landed here.'



An older and wiser
George Henry Blunden.
Source: John Coleman

The Blundens referred to in this extract included: George and Amelia, and children Florence, Harry, Marion, Elsie and the new-born baby Nellie. Cecil Blunden, the eldest of their children was considered an adult. At the age of 13 when embarking on the *Royal Tar*, he was listed separately to his family, and has not been named on this return journey. He did return to Australia, whether it was on this ship or another is not known.

The *Embleton* arrived at the Semaphore, Adelaide, and as the above news item states, the Blundens had to be initially disembarked there until a steamer could be found to take them to their place of origin. The mayor and residents of the Semaphore took care of these destitute people for over a week, whilst the South Australian government negotiated with other colonial governments to help fund these families' transportation home.

At last, on Tuesday February 5th, a steamer, the *Fitzroy*, took the remaining immigrants to Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. The South Australian Chronicle of Saturday February 9th 1895 noted:

'before the vessel sailed they waited on the collector of customs and asked him to convey their thanks to the people who had befriended them during their stay in this colony.'

It seems the Blundens possibly disembarked at Melbourne (although New South Wales was the colony from which they had originated in 1893).

Moving around

In 1897 a daughter, Alice, was born in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, and George resumed his old trade as a baker. His wife Amelia ran a bakery and confectionary business in Brunswick Street Fitzroy and at Alphington, in partnership with Hannah Schmidt. On March 2nd 1897 there was a notice in the Government Gazette that this partnership was to be dissolved by mutual consent and that Amelia would continue her business at the Fitzroy shop.

The *Gippsland Times* (at Sale in Victoria), on June 1st 1899, published a notice from A. Blunden advertising taking over a bakery and tea rooms in Raymond Street, Sale. It says the new proprietor is late of Warragul and Melbourne. Here at Sale another daughter, Violet, was born that year. In 1901 they were back in Melbourne, living in Carlton. Here in 1901, the Blundens registered Violet's birth, and another daughter, Olive, was added to the family. Their last child Amelia was born in 1902, also in Carlton.

The next record we have is the sad news that George's wife Amelia had died, possibly during, or as a result of, this last childbirth. A notice appeared in *The Argus* on October 20th 1902 that Amelia had died at their residence, 22 Grattan Street Carlton and she was only 39 years of age. The funeral was at their home and she was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

A new marriage

By 1908, George had married Hanna Emma Jane McClymont and the Blundens were on the move again, George continuing to work as a baker. In 1909 George was a baker of Broadwood Parade Oakleigh, in 1914 at Hotham Street Traralgon, and in 1919 at Williamstown Road Seddon. By 1924 George had retired, (or at least there was no occupation listed for him in the electoral rolls from this time on) and was living in Arlington Street Ringwood, and then Normanby Street Brighton. In 1931 they lived in Rathmines Road Auburn. Hannah died in 1934 and George then lived at May Street Kooyong by 1937. In 1943, he was living with his son Cecil, a shopkeeper, and Cecil's wife and two sons at Williamstown Road, Footscray.

George Blunden's life seems to have come full circle. He died in 1947 in the Melbourne suburb of Parkville at the age of 92. He clearly was a man willing to take huge risks for a better life and paid a heavy price in the end. It is a pity we have no records of his reflections on his time in 'New Australia', nor any knowledge of his personal views about why this social experiment failed.

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hurleyskidmorehistory.com

Notes:

¹ Souter, Gavin *A Peculiar People - The Australians in Paraguay* (1981) p92

² *Morning Bulletin Rockhampton* May 22 1894

³ *Morning Bulletin Rockhampton* May 22 1894

⁴ *Morning Bulletin Rockhampton* May 22 1894

Other resources:

Australian Electoral Rolls 1903-1954 (Ancestry.com)

Trove (National Library of Australia)

Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage certificates