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Figsby & Fareham 47-49 Robe Street, St Kilda

Figsby and Fareham were built in 1867 by their owner/builder, William Allen of St Kilda Hill. Allen was builder of the first St Kilda Town Hall on the corner of Grey and Barkly Streets in the 1850s. It was demolished in the 1930s, (33). Later he built Linden (8) for Moritz Michaelis and his architect Alfred Kürsteiner, in 1870. It is said that they both include some design elements derived from that of the early Town Hall: the Roman Doric columns, verandah and internal stairs.



Figsby & Fareham, 47-49 Robe Street, St Kilda, 2004

Fareham was the name first proposed for the municipality of St Kilda, yet discarded in favour of the more popularly known 'St Kilda'. Figsby is named for an early tenant, Henry

Figsby Young. He and his business partner, Thomas Joshua Jackson, were born in Dublin and related through their mothers' families. Henry Figsby Young Senior had been licensee of the Elsternwick Hotel (39) in 1858 and the Freemasons' Arms Hotel in North Melbourne in 1867. That year, Figsby Junior became licensee of Sparrow's Hotel, St Kilda in partnership with Jackson. In 1875 the partners sold this lease and took over the licence of the Princes' Bridge Hotel, corner Swanston and Flinders Street, Melbourne. Together, for thirty years they successfully ran the hotel that still famously bears their names.

The important early journalist and novelist Marcus Clarke (1846-81), lived at 49 Robe Street and wrote part of his great novel, *For the Term of his Natural Life* there. It was published as a serial over 1870-71. Paul de Serville wryly describes Clarke as a 'gentleman bohemian'.

Albert Tucker (1914-99) and his wife Joy Hester (1920-60) were two of Australia's most fascinating, significant and influential artists. In 1944, they left East Melbourne where they had been living, to look after Hester's difficult, ill and deteriorating mother in Elwood. Hester was heavily pregnant. She felt frustrated in not being able to continue indulging in the affairs she was conducting behind Tucker's back (and there is doubt that the father was Tucker). It was all too much, and in December, the couple moved out in search for somewhere more convenient to live.



Joy Hester at Beach



Joy and Sweeney Hester, 1945

Housing was scarce during the war, so in early 1945 they gladly pounced on a spacious first floor north-facing front room, with a kitchen adjoining. (This room is now a bathroom). Here at Figsby, they both worked, preferring the southern light and shared a 'scruffy' bathroom with other tenants. In this single room, they slept, lived and painted. Here they produced commercial art and the cover of the 1944 (*Images of Modern Evil*) issue of the famous periodical *Angry Penguins*.

It was while they were here, that their son, Sweeney Hallam Tucker was born on 5 February 1945. He was named after the protagonist in T.S. Elliot's macabre, unfinished verse drama, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926). At first glance, Elliot's Sweeney seems like a philosophising ordinary bloke, not a hero, not intellectual. His last words seem sensible:

We all gotta do what we gotta do
We gonna sit here and have a tune
We're gonna stay and we're gonna do
And somebody's gonna pay the rent.

But Elliot depicts a threatening world of spiritual terror and exposes a man's horror at his capacity for violence. There's a savage, almost sadistic love duet between Sweeney and Doris: 'Birth and copulation and death. / That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all. / Birth and copulation and death.' But who was the obsessed Sweeney? Clearly these images influenced Tucker's work, a morally distorting lens on wartime St Kilda, like those in Nolan's Giggie Palace. But why on earth would Joy and Bert name the child after such a dark figure? Or did they like the (slightly Australian) sound of the name, with the bonus of a smart literary reference?

On the balcony, Bert constructed a playpen for their Sweeney. Twenty years later, I knew Sweeney Reed (1944-79) as the glamorous and charismatic entrepreneur of Strines' Gallery, 130 Faraday Street, Carlton, long after at the age of two, he was taken to live with John and Sunday Reed in their artistic circle at Heide in Bulleen and who formally adopted him at the age of five (17). Here he was still living.

Both Strines and Heide are still repositories of art: Strines, its exciting architecture now somewhat bowdlerised, is now Bridget McDonnell Gallery and Heide, much expanded as the Museum of Modern Art at 7 Templestowe Road. After the Reeds moved to their new house next door to Heide, Sweeney occupied their former home. Both are now open to the public as Heide I and II.

Hester had grown up in Elwood, attended St Michael's Church of England Grammar School and savoured St Kilda's increasingly open beach culture: for Hester, living in St Kilda was like coming home. Tucker, the puritan, was horrified by the sexual, steamy street life of wartime St Kilda.

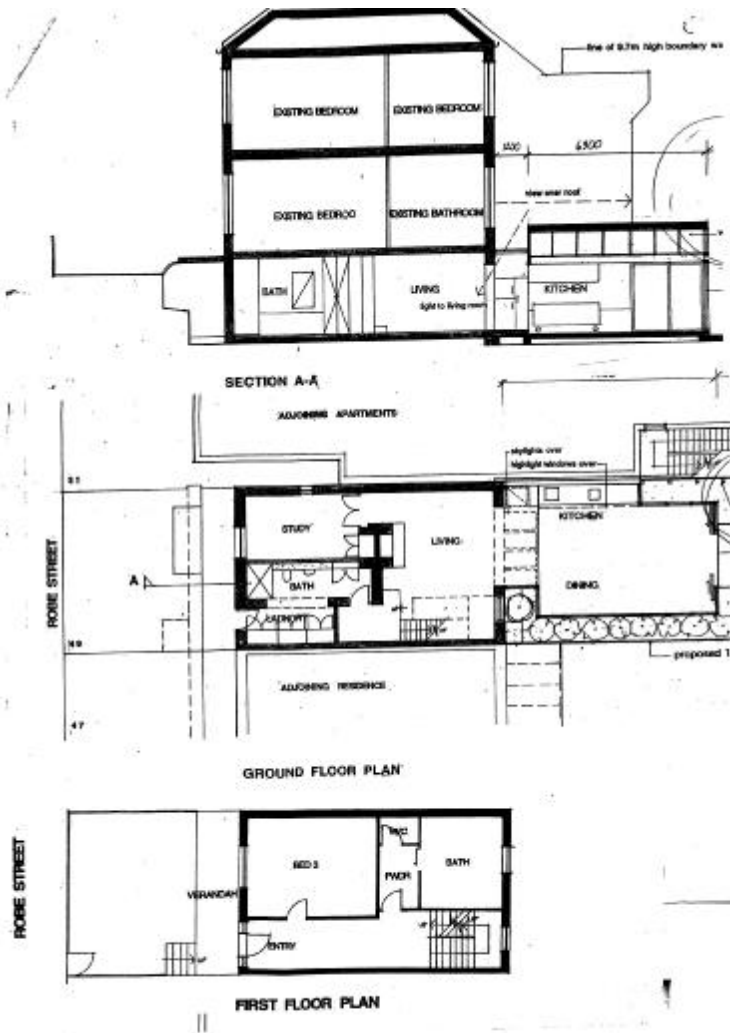
In his novel, *My Brother Jack*, George Johnston describes the unravelling of inhibitions in the 1920s, which was only heightened during the war:

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Beyond our neat hedged perimeters, the world suddenly seemed transformed into a jungle of iniquities, of violence, of sex, flaunted revolt, and alarming uncertainties. The newspapers reprimanded in editorials the wayward follies and excesses of the young, quoted hair-raising legal reports of teen-age girls who carried contraceptives in their handbags, spluttered about 'companionate marriage', lifted their circulations with shocking stories of scandalous goings-on in parked coupés and sedans, and screamed for the burning of books. Along St Kilda Esplanade and in the open parks, policemen and Peeping Toms prowled with torches at the ready to catch flaming youth in the very act of burning.

After painting the masterly, abstracted *Sun Bathers* and the leering *Bride*, both in 1944, Tucker returned to his moralistic and iconic *Images of Modern Evil* series. Janine Burke, his biographer, feels the seven images he completed at Robe Street, (Nos 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23 and 24) are his most consistent and best.

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Plan view of Figsby & Fareham: Tucker and Hester occupied first floor

Tucker's photographs of Robe Street are also instructive. A visitor was surprised that in them he has removed all reference to Hester's works, only his own are visible. There are also many photographs of baby Sweeney at Robe Street, taken by the proud father.

If Tucker's images painted at Robe Street were derived from his experience in St Kilda and his reading of fiction, Hester is the only Australian artist to draw the reality of the Holocaust. She took Sweeney into a newsreel cinema to see: 'all these Belsen films'. A woman abused her for exposing a child to such horror on the screen. But she emerged stunned and produced brush and ink sketches directly from her memory of the film footage. Works such as *A Frightened Woman* resulted. 'Upstairs in their front room, (metres) from each other, Tucker and Hester produced not only their best art, but some of the best Australian art of that time', asserts Janine Burke.

Both Hester and Tucker were open to experiences of the occult. One night, in bed reading they were visited by the loud crash and rushing wind of a poltergeist. They stared at each other paralysed with fear. Poltergeist is German for 'noise ghost' (or 'guest'). Ghosts, Burke explains, are said to be spirits of the dead, bound to the place they haunt by anguish. Hester and Tucker both wondered if 47 Robe Street was haunted. In 1946, they left, and moved to 2 Martin Street, back in Elwood.

Sidney Nolan, having grown up in Pakington Street, St Kilda, also painted Robe Street, looking towards the Esplanade and the Catani Gardens. The work is entitled *Robe Street, St Kilda*. In 1940, he shared a studio at 5 Smith Street, St Kilda for a year, with John Sinclair. It is Sinclair's portrait which is much abstracted as the remarkable painting *Moonboy*, painted then. On the back of this painting is a *Portrait of John Sinclair* at St Kilda. Nolan says: '...because I once saw him at St Kilda in front of the setting moon, or, in fact, the rising moon.' Nolan was a frequent visitor to the Tuckers in Robe Street.

As a dealer at Sweeney Reed Galleries, 266 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, Sweeney held one exhibition of his father's: the entire *Images of Modern Evil* series. They were purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Night Image, No 13 in Tucker's *Images of Modern Evil* series, depicts Robe Street from the Esplanade. *Night Image, No. 19* shows the cast-iron balcony of no. 47. Both were painted in 1945.

These two polychromatic brick terraces are unusual in Melbourne in being three storied, the lowest floor being a basement, entirely below street level. The few other basement examples in Melbourne are in Park Street, Parkville, George Street, Fitzroy and East Melbourne. But the type and pattern of the cast-iron lace on the verandahs is beautiful and rare in Melbourne. Dr Graeme Robertson, the authority on cast-iron, identified only five examples comparable, (two of which are now demolished) in Melbourne and in Ballarat. The light filigree pattern is more common in New Orleans, itself derived from that in British Regency towns of c1800-20.

In the late 1970s, Albert Tucker decided to return to live in St Kilda. He bought a large single-storied Victorian terrace at 55 Blessington Street. This is the Daniel Tuomy house, which is the only St Kilda building known to me to have been designed by the significant nineteenth century architect George R. Johnson. (43). 'You get a greater sense of the range of ...human beings,...in... St Kilda. If you walk up and down Fitzroy Street, well there it all is', he said in 1988. He returned to 47 Robe Street with Burke and acknowledged to her the role of the lacework as inspiration for the grotesque female figures in the *Images of Modern Evil*.

About 1980, after probably 40 years as boarding houses, the two houses were renovated by Urban Spaces Pty. Ltd, architects and builders, of which a couple of years later I became a director. Then the rear balconies were removed to capture more south light.

After two years overseas, following completion of her earlier biography of Hester in 1985, Burke also decided to return to live in St Kilda. With supreme irony, and perhaps some little effect on Tucker, now remarried, Burke found a flat in Mimosas, a large 1920s block in Robe Street, only three doors from No. 47.

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