

Alex Colley – The Last of the Tiger Walkers

1909–2014

Alex Colley, SBW's oldest member has passed away at 104 years of age.

Alex's life spanned a period so long and in a world with so many changes that it is hard to imagine what that must have been like. He was born 6 years after the Wright Brothers' first powered flight and died with the entire world on line via the Internet.

But Alex just didn't live through an entire century of change, he changed it himself and in profound and permanent ways. We are all the beneficiaries of his enduring work and his achievements. There is so much to say about the man and the scope of his influence both as a conservationist and as a bushwalker.

Alex was a conservationist decades before conservation was a mainstream issue. He was advocating the need for national parks and wilderness areas before the Second World War when such positions were considered radical. Originally influenced by talks Myles Dunphy gave at SBW meetings, Alex recognised the need for the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs to take a firm

conservation stand. His experience with political parties and the Federation convinced Alex that rational argument backed by facts from experts in their field could win the day. With this approach Alex achieved so much.

He joined the Colong Committee in 1968 when the Colong Caves and Boyd Plateau were threatened by a massive limestone mine proposal. Alex devised all sorts of strategies to frustrate the proposal, from street demonstrations, to encouraging a mass purchase of single shares in the developer's company to bolster the share registry with conservationists and stack the company's AGM. Through 10 years of work by the Committee, the mine proposal was defeated and the Kanangra area was safe. He even got the Liberal Party convention to unanimously support a motion from his local Turramurra branch to support the conservation case.

Alex was secretary of the Colong Committee from 1972 to 2007, when he turned 95, and in that time wrote submission after submission to governments and actively campaigned to preserve a fair proportion of the north coast and tablelands



The legendary Tiger Walkers. Alex is left of Hilma with Dot English (Butler) next to Hilma. Norbett Carlon is second from right. The other tigers are Jack Debert (SBW's first President), Bill McCosker, Len Scotland, David Stead and Gordon Smith

for national parks. He went bushwalking with Neville Wran and Bob Carr and carried considerable influence with them, leading to his crowning success of getting the Greater Blue Mountains region proclaimed as a world heritage area. Bob Carr is on record as saying that when people take pride in knowing the Blue Mountains has that world status they can thank Alex Colley.

His energy for the cause seemed boundless. In 2001 he broke his neck in a fall and was hospitalised. Spiro Haginikitas, one of our long time SBW members visited Alex in hospital all bound up in braces and clamps for his neck. Despite these handicaps Spiro observed Alex busily writing. "What'ya up to Alex?", Spiro asked. Alex responded, "Oh, I'm just writing up a Plan of Management for Lamington National Park!"

For all of his work Alex was showered with awards: the Catchment Leader of the Year in 1998, the Senior Achiever Award in 2000, Nature Conservation Council Centenary Medal 'to commemorate the centenary of federation of Australia' in 2001, Senior Australian Achiever Award in 2006, World Environment Day Conservation Awards - Allen Strom Hall of Fame also in 2006, the Lifetime of Conservation Award from Australian Geographic in 2009 and of course the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1984..

Alex wrote two books on conservation, *Sustainability* and the glorious coffee table production *Blue Mountains - World Heritage* published in 2004 with Henry Gold's magnificent photos.

All of these things that Alex achieved would more than fill the lifetimes of most people, but for Alex this is only part of the story. His other great love was of course bushwalking, and as well as being a legend as a leading conservationist he was a legend as a bushwalker too.

Imagine this. Alex went bush for the first time in his home town Lithgow at the tender age of 4 back in 1913. His last big walk was in Central Australia with Dot Butler in the 1990s. That is nine decades of walking. Amazing. Alex said that growing up in Lithgow was great as the bush was so close. In those days the family's means of transport was horse and buggy. He would get up at 4am in the summer, meet his walking companion, go for a bushwalk, get back for breakfast and then go to school. When the depression came, Alex would disappear into the bush for weeks carrying only a bag of brown rice for sustenance. On the occasion of his 90th birthday Alex described how he joined SBW. His own words tell the story much better than I can. This is what he said.



Alex and Dot Butler

"I was invited to join the club in 1931. I was having my lunch after a walk in among some low bushes just around the hotel site at Megalong and a head appeared above the bushes and introduced himself as Mouldy Harrison. Anyway we had a nice little talk and he said, 'why don't you join the Bushwalkers?' I said 'Oh Mouldy, I couldn't do that.' I was doing an Economics course and I had to work 44 hours a week and use all my spare time to study so I couldn't do that.

Anyway then I had a second invitation when I was doing Economics. I somehow think there must have been some vibes between us I think. I sat next to Tom Herbert and we got very friendly and one day I mentioned I'd been for a walk and he said, 'What, do you go bushwalking?' and I said, 'Yes' and he said, 'Well fancy that - I'm the President of the Sydney Bush Walkers' and he asked me to join and I said 'Oh no Tom, I'm a bird of limited intelligence, I couldn't do that, I've got to concentrate on this'. But Tom could. Tom not only did an Economics course, he used my lecture notes quite a bit. I gave him a copy and he passed nevertheless. He was able to row for the faculty and be the President of the Sydney Bush Walkers. How he did it all at once I don't know but he did.

Anyway when I passed I sat around and my walking companions got a bit too fat or a bit too unfit to go out into the bush and I thought, 'Well, why don't I go into the Bush Walkers.' So I walked into the club room and as I walked in up came Mouldy Harrison who said 'Hello Alec' and I said 'Hello Mouldy'. We'd only seen each other for ten minutes and he remembered my name and by some miracle I remembered his. Anyway I had an easy passage then. They couldn't really turn me down because I was nominated by the President. I got in quite easily and a little while after that I was elected to be on the Committee and I have been on the Committee nearly every year since then. I enjoyed that very much".

Alex joined SBW in 1936. He was President in 1941 and 1942, he has been editor of the magazine, Vice-President, Conservation Secretary for 30 years and

mostly on the committee for all of 60 plus years, a feat never likely to be repeated. Alex put an indelible stamp on the character of the club both in running the club and with his walks. He explored bushland unlikely to have been trodden by white man before. This included Mt Currockbilly in Morton NP and a fair slice of Wollemi, plus discovering many passes and negotiable routes in the Blue Mountains. He once walked from the Wolgan to Coricudgy and then to Putty through the heart of the Wollemi wilderness in 10 days armed only with the very rough sketch maps of the time, quite possibly the first white man to get through all that country. He was a member of the legendary Tigers whose walking feats were almost superhuman. The names of members of this group within the club are historic. Apart from Alex there was Hilma Galliot whom Alex married, Jack Debert (SBW's first president), Bill McCosker, Len Scotland, David Stead, Gordon Smith and Dorothy English (better known now as Dot Butler). Hilma was no slouch. She once walked 50 miles (not kilometres) down the Grose River with Gordon Smith in 24 hours. The perfect partner for Alex.

Being the pioneer and explorer that he was, Alex led many original walks on the walks program such as the first group climb of Carlon Head, and a weekend walk from Wentworth Falls to Katoomba via Kedumba, the Coxs, Scotts Main Range, the Kowmung, the Gangerang traverse via Ti-Willa, to the Cox/Kanangra junction, up Breakfast Creek and on to Katoomba. That's a hell of a way of going between those two towns. In fact Alex's contribution to the Club's walks program is almost inestimable. Here is just a taste of what Alex delivered.

- April 1939 – Katoomba – Nellies Glen – Carlons Farm – Black Dog Track – Coxs River – Cedar Creek – Ruined Castle – Scenic Railway – Katoomba
- October 1941 - Mongarlowe Road - Currockbilly Mountain - Clyde River - Brooman Road
- October 1943 – Nowra – Cambewarra – Barren Grounds – Budderoo – Jamberoo – Kiama
- August 1947 - Canberra - Mt Franklin - Mt Gingera - Mt Franklin - Canberra (Train. £6/2/6).
- May 1958 - Katoomba - Mt Solitary - Korrowall Buttress - Cedar Creek - Katoomba.
- January 1991 - Batemans Bay - Tabourie via coast.

That is over half a century of leading.

Alex was the complete bushman, always finding his routes through the bush and discovering water where others said there was none. He introduced his daughter, Fran and kids from other families to skiing (Alex did cross country skiing while the family downhill over many seasons). Back in those days Perisher boasted a couple of rope tows only. Alex shunned such conveniences and always skied up the hill. The families camped at Sawpit, which was a little primitive, especially when the very limited warm water in the shower ran out. That never bothered Alex as he just bathed in the local creek. During the

Second World War he enlisted in the army and as part of his basic training went on forced marches. Alex recalls how much he enjoyed that experience although he never met another soldier who liked it. A mark of a true bushwalker.

When Alex married Hilma their first walk together was not a stroll in the park but an assault on Ti-Willa Plateau in the Gangerangs. He loved that part of the Blue Mountains. He also loved the Jamberoo area, where he built a cabin and called it Ti-Willa. This began a move by many bushwalking and SBW notables to establish cabins there, including the family of Paddy Pallin, Jean and Ray Kirkby and Frank and Anice Duncan.

After Hilma's death, Alex and Dot Butler became partners for 20 happy years until Dot moved to Tasmania to be closer to her daughter, Iluna Bluewater. They were a legendary couple, both with amazing bushwalking achievements.

The club would never have run as smoothly as it did without Alex's "behind the scenes" work. Before the operation was moved to the Hollands, there was for years, in Alex's garage, a monthly gathering of people like Dot Butler, Geoff Wagg, Spiro Haginikitas and Ray Hookway helping to print the club Magazine and tackling the old printer. Before the internet and email, this was the means by which SBW members knew what was happening and what walks were on.

Alex knew a bit about printing as he had worked part time in the publishing section at Sydney University where he was an undergraduate. Sitting his final exams he was also the clerk in the examination section of the Registrar's office so he may have been the first student ever to see his results before they were published.

There were so many sides to Alex, and I'm talking here about Alex from the Sydney Bush Walker Club perspective. Others will recount wonderful stories about Alex through all his other work and activities. There was so much to this wonderful man

Alex is survived by his daughter Frances Colley (past SBW member), her husband, David Hart, and Alex's twin grandchildren Alexander and Louisa Colley Hart. Long time SBW member Shirley Dean had enduring guardianship for Alex and has supported Fran in caring for Alex (and Dot) for two decades when Fran and her family lived in Adelaide and then in the US. This was great dedication. Shirley was in fact introduced to SBW by Hilma when they formed a great friendship.

Recently Australia's latest list of national treasures were announced. It was noted by other bushwalking clubs, not our own, that there were no bushwalkers on the list and Alex was an obvious nomination. What more can we all say than that Alex: you have in fact been a national treasure for a very long time. A very long life, lived to the fullest. I hope you are right now up there somewhere discovering new tracks to follow.