



REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

Nick Cassim – The Clubhouse Memoir

Nick Cassim: I needed to join, I needed to learn to sail. Bill Psaltis was the accountant for the Amateurs, the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club. So he talked me into joining the club. Now that was before the club had a clubhouse. And I would think that Billy Gale, and myself, are the only two living people that ever went to any of the old meetings down at Customs House.

David Salter: I was going to ask, it had no premises at all?

NC: No, no premises. We used to meet in Customs House at Circular Quay. And after meetings we'd have a biscuit and a cup of tea. Right [*laughter*]. So anyhow, I had to moor this little boat somewhere and there was a fellow, I don't know how I got to meet him, called Walton. He lived right opposite, exactly opposite where the clubhouse is now. He had a mooring there. And somehow or other he had two moorings and he said, 'You can have one of them'.

Where the clubhouse is now, as you know, was an old ramshackle boatshed run by a guy called Max Emken. He was a Danish guy. He was about 76 years old. And he used to live on the premises. I got to know old Max pretty well.

I've never really said this to anybody, for fear of two things. Professionally it became a professional secret, but secondly it would have sounded as if I was boasting. But if I make the bold statement that there wouldn't be a clubhouse except for me, and I'll tell you the circumstances.

What happened was, in 1953, the Landlord and Tenancy regulations from the Second World War were still in force. And where this becomes important is that Max Emken, for some odd reason and I can't remember how, had some sub-tenancy rights to the building next door which was the Cremorne Club. Now the Cremorne Club in my day had a rumour that both the Labour Party and the Liberal Party had their first meetings there.

Anyhow, there were two brothers, lawyers, the McFadden boys, Matthew McFadden and his brother Tom. They became famous. In the legal realm they were famous because they had a fistfight in their waiting room in front of all their customers, and they were in partnership and parted company.

But anyway, Matthew turned out to be a trustee of the Cremorne Club. They decided to evict Emken and Max asked me to act for him. Anyway, I managed to pull a swiftie because, in the landlord and tenancy regulations towards the end of the War, you couldn't evict anybody unless you found them an alternative accommodation.

So I found out – I can't quite work out how it happened – that he came within the regulation, and I said we'll go if you find us an alternative accommodation like this. They couldn't of course, and they pulled out. Nevertheless, no ill feelings about that. So Max then decides to sell the place. He sold it to this English couple. They were an interesting couple. The lady's name was Rose, and they both told me they were members of MI5. They had been in MI5 during the War.

The place needed a lot of attention, and their company was Clover Investments. Anyhow, they decided they wanted to sell. So the developers were around looking on the waterfront. But, at the time, all of a sudden when Clover Investments wanted to sell they were given an order from the Council to fix the place up. It was going to cost a fortune.

DS: This was the boat shed and the clubhouse?

NC: Not the clubhouse. No, the Cremorne Club had its own lease. Details are slightly funny. They had the thing out for offer. Now, this is where the story starts.

The Cremorne Club had a lease, and I was a member of the Amateurs club and I suggested to them that the club might be interested as a bidder if they would fix the price. This was before the order came along from the Council. Anyway, they were working around and working around for a while, and some developer came down and started talking to them.

I thought this is an ideal site because in the old days, that used to be a site for the ferries to come alongside. It was a tea garden. But also, that was before it became really a bridge club, a ladies' bridge club. Except there was a great big dinner table in the middle of it. Anyhow, there was a lot of bickering going on, but finally they said we'd like to sell. But, you know, these developers will probably offer us good money. Then the order came along from the Council.

In those days, the Amateurs was really governed by what we used to call the 'Hunter's Hill Push'. The Merringtons, Stuart Chambers, the Gales, etc. They were really the Amateurs at the time. As it happened, the Labor Party was in power at the time and the Minister for Lands was a guy called Jack Renshaw, who lived where? Hunter's Hill!

Well, I said, 'Look, why don't you see what you could do about getting a lease?' Of course, there was a lot of anti-yacht club people pinching the prime sites on the harbour, you know, this is the Jack Munday thing, you see. But anyway, I had an office down near the Railway and Ernie Merrington was an optician and he had his shop down in lower Pitt Street near the Railway, and I used to get my specs there. I got friendly with Ernie and, you know, what happened to him later...he became president of the YA and so on. I remember

going to him saying, 'Ernie, look, there's a chance these sound like they could be reasonable premises'.

Of course, there was a club committee formed looking for premises. Right opposite the squadron, Kurraba, there was a park there and there was a lot of talk about getting a lease there and building a clubhouse, and that was just one of the places we looked at.

But anyway, I said, 'Well, we'd save building costs, and we'd save the problem of having to overcome some objection from the 'Greenies', so, you know, why don't we consider this as a little place?'

Anyhow, before any offer was made, I managed to talk to...now today, a lawyer couldn't do this... acting for both parties is a no-no now. In those days, if you were a lawyer, they relied upon your integrity, that if you had a conflict you would immediately... Well, I had no conflict, but I was acting for both parties and that was an advantage and I can say this, you know, I introduced **Clover Investments** to them.

Then we found out there was a whole lot of problems with the lease. Whoever drew the lease at Green Street on the parish map...you know where the stairs are...Green Street actually, on the parish map, extends right down to the lawn on the waterfront. So, therefore, we were taking a lease of public land. Argh! Anyway, we worked our way through that. Not me, of course, don't forget that John Merrington became Mayor of Hunter's Hill.

So he was in the local council scene very much. So one day, fortunately, the Lands Department found a way around that, shall we say.

So, finally an offer was made. In the meanwhile, the developers had basically almost backed off because of the work that had to be done, and the cost of doing anything, and they wouldn't have been able to put anything residential down there, and so on. So I managed to get Clover Investments to agree to a price.

DS: What did the club do for capital though?

NC: Well, I'll tell you. The club had very little money. So we had meetings and very little money was forthcoming from the members. Very disappointing. Finally, we approached our bank and the members of the committee, all of us, guaranteed the loan, and Clover Investments took the money and left.

DS: So you were already on the board then?

NC: That's right. As things turned out, we had all the moorings and all the moorings were sunk, all of them.

DS: So the moorings were part of the purchase of the boatshed?

NC: Well, they weren't, no. We had to go to the MSB, the Maritime Services Board, as it was then. But we managed to secure them. The whole process, unfortunately, let's say from a conveyancing point of view, all this started back in the late 1950s. I joined the club in '58. I'd learned a lot of all this as the solicitor for the club. And I might say, I'm still the solicitor for the club after 74 years.

DS: I know. I've made a note of that. You'd better hang on for a bit longer.

NC: Well, Gary's taken over a bit, my son Gary.

Well, anyway, that was very interesting because fiddling around with these leases, oh, quite honestly it was a nightmare. Renshaw went out of business and the Liberal Party came in.

But, anyhow, fortunately, and I must say the Merringtons had a lot to do with it, because nothing would have happened, offer or no offer being accepted. It was no good unless you could get the lease. And we managed to get a 28-year lease, which was heaven sent. We expected 10 years or eight or 10 years, but 28 years.

DS: You've had such a close association with the Amateurs. You helped create the place really down there. What's the club mean to you?

NC: Oh, everything. It's a cornerstone of my life. It's got a unique quality about it, which is not apparent in any other club. I'm a little bit ye olde worldy. It has all the features of camaraderie, and that sort of thing, that you don't get in modern yacht clubs. You go to those clubs, and you mix with the crew on your boat, maybe one or two others. But look at what happens when you go down to the Amateurs!