



INFORMATION NEWSLETTER

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Our September Meeting Sir Hubert Wilkins

Our own David Jarman gave us an informative and well-researched talk on Sir Hubert Wilkins, South Australian explorer, film maker and aviator (to name a few), who was world famous in his day but less well-known later until quite recently.

George Hubert Wilkins, born in 1888, grew up in a tiny cottage shared by his parents and 13 older siblings near Mt Bryan, S.A. They had to walk 9km to school at Mt Bryan East, and life was generally very hard. The family property was situated just North of Goyder's Line, beyond which farming was an almost futile business - besieged by dingos, rabbits, and drought. During the times of drought, the family all but starved, and their debts piled up. Finally, in 1905, their father sold the farm to pay their debts, and the family moved to Adelaide. The cottage they lived in was rebuilt in 2001 through the generosity of Dick Smith. It has a plaque in Wilkins' memory and is open to visitors.

Once in Adelaide, Wilkins' father wanted him to go to university, which he did – but it was short-lived. With a talent for fixing machinery, it happened that he was asked to fix a generator used in the production of movies. Keenly interested in this, he learned to make motion pictures, and to the disappointment of his father, he quit university and travelled around making and showing movies. Finding an opportunity in Sydney through an advertisement, Wilkins was very keen to take it up, but couldn't afford the fare. Undeterred, he stowed away on a ship, where he was discovered and made to work very hard to earn his passage!

Wilkins became an accomplished movie maker, and in 1908 he was offered a job in London. On the way there he was kidnapped but managed to escape at the first opportunity. While in London,

he visited an airfield. He wanted to take an aerial movie, but the available plane had no spare seat. His solution was to strap himself to the fuselage, and thus became the first man to make movies from the air. From this experience, he also became interested in flying, and although he passed all his pilot's exams, he was never licensed because he was colour-blind. He flew, anyway, and continued to make aerial movies. During WWI he was arrested by the Turks because he had flown into their airspace. Luckily, they let him go when they saw that he had not filmed on their side of the border. During this first trip overseas, he also became the first man to fly over an Arctic area.

Wilkins returned to Australia after the death of his father. In Adelaide, he was given a fabulous reception, as the news of his exploits had spread far and wide. While home, he attempted to join the air force, but was once again rejected because of his colour-blindness. He then returned to London and became an official war photographer.

Wilkins and another film maker, Frank Hurley, filmed during the rest of WWI in the trenches, etc. He was wounded nine times in all, but never fired a shot himself. "He said, "I'll never shoot a gun – I shoot movies. He was awarded a Military Cross for his efforts to rescue wounded soldiers during the 3rd battle of Ypres, becoming the only Australian photographer to win a combat medal. A bar was added to that MC after he assumed command of some soldiers whose officers had been lost in the Battle of the Hindenburg Line.

After the war, Billy Hughes offered 10,000 pounds to the first person to fly from London to Australia. Wilkins entered, but crash-landed his plane. He then went on to Russia, where he met Lenin, then returned to Australia in 1921. He went on expeditions for the British Museum in the north of Australia, filming and gathering information on tropical bird life, but also ended

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up having species of rock wallaby and lizard named after him. He published a book in 1926, which was acclaimed by the British museum, but frowned upon by the Australian government because of his opinions on the treatment of Aboriginal people and the damage being done to the natural environment.

After this, Wilkins went to America, where he negotiated with sponsors from Chicago and Detroit to fly over the North Pole to Europe. Unfortunately, the plane crashed. In 1927 a new plane was procured which performed well, but the weather was very bad. He arrived at Spitsbergen, Norway, in the middle of a blizzard. Six days later he continued to a mining town where he could send a telegram to say that he had made the flight.

When he returned to America to an impressive reception, a Broadway actress from Victoria called Suzanne Bennett had been chosen to be his chaperone. This turned out to be a love match, and they were married in 1929. Wilkins continued to go on expeditions, and Suzanne continued acting.

William Randolph Hearst sponsored expeditions for Wilkins, wanting to publish his films of the trips. On his next trip to Antarctica, he saw that a great deal of the ice had melted since his first trip, thus becoming the first person to notice the effects of climate change.

Wilkins leased a submarine from the American Navy for an expedition under the polar ice cap. The voyage was ill-fated, with almost everything going wrong that possibly could. He was unable to achieve his object, but he did prove that a submarine could function under the ice, so providing valuable information for the future endeavors of others.

Wilkins and Suzanne bought a farm in Pennsylvania on which to retire, where Wilkins enjoyed fixing the farm machinery. He volunteered his services during WWII but was rejected on account of his age. However, he still managed to get in on the action, and was captured by the Germans. He escaped, of course.

Sir Hubert Wilkins died in 1958 at the age of 70. In all, Wilkins was awarded 15 medals around the world during his life, was knighted by the king, and had many streets and places named after him.

In accordance with his wishes, his ashes were scattered over the North Pole, as later, were Suzanne's.

This is the short version of a much more detailed talk from an enthusiastic speaker about Sir Hubert Wilkins, to whom David referred as "a man ahead of his time".

News from the Marion Heritage Research Centre

The Marion Heritage Research Centre is open to the public on our normal days, **Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 10am to 4pm.** Due to number restrictions it is advisable to make an appointment before coming, to avoid disappointment. Our sanitising & distancing protocols must be observed. **Thank you.** Contact us via phone **7420 6455** or email heritage@marion.sa.gov.au

Due to covid19, the MHRC has cancelled most of its live events/talks this year. However, we have an archaeologist guest speaker whose talk will be presented online at **2pm Wednesday 21st October**, on the topic 'Digging Up An Irish Past'. Keep an eye on the City of Marion website, or call the MHRC on 7420 6455 for how to view it.

Then, for Remembrance Day, join us for a talk about *Bomber Command* by Anne Young, 2pm, Wednesday 11th November at the Marion Council.

Free but bookings are essential as places limited.

Call 7420 6455 or email heritage@marion.sa.gov.au



Marion Historical Society Next meeting:

Our Annual Christmas Lunch

Meet at 12pm for a 12.30 start on **Sunday 22nd November**, at the Marion Sports Club.

RSVP please by Wednesday 18th.
phone Ian 82985585 or email:
marionhistoricalsociety@gmail.com.
Partners are, of course, welcome.

The program for next year will be given out at the lunch.