A Letter

About Art Nouveau Architecture in Melbourne
Catalogue Introduction, reprinted in
Historic Environment, vol. 1, No. 1, 1980, p. 9

Friendly Societies Dispensary,
Ryrie Street, Geelong.
(Facade 1904)

I am writing to point out an error which was incorporated by Jenepher Duncan, and subsequently reprinted in Historic Environment. It concerns the misdating (by six years) of Laird and Barlow's Friendly Societies Dispensary in Ryrie Street, Geelong. The quoted date, 1898, is incorporated in relief on the parapet of the building and thus, included without question in the Errey thesis Victorian Architectural Ornament. The error is compounded by its inclusion, via the Errey thesis, in the Architects Index held at the University of Melbourne.

If we examine the contract books of (Architects) Laird and Barlow (after 1908, Laird and Buchan), the entry of 30 July 1904 alerts us to the true date of the Art Nouveau decoration incorporated on the facade of the building. "...Friendly Societies Dispensary. Alterations and additions to premises, Ryrie Street. J.H. Tingate,(contractor), as per tender £1087.0.0". The contract book goes on to record that the certificate-in-tand was issued on 23 June 1905, by which time the total price had risen to £118.15.6.
A local journal, the *Federal Record* (devoted to news of Geelong's clubs and societies, as well as matters literary, scientific and cultural) records in January 1905 that '...the committee of the Geelong U.F.S. Dispensary recently purchased buildings in Ryrie Street for the purpose of carrying on their operations in the future, and in order to bring the new premises thoroughly up-to-date a contract was let for their renovation and alteration.' Later a reading of *Federal Record* (of which the Geelong Historical Records Centre has an almost complete run) reveals a further connection between architect and client when it states that Brother J.A. Laird was the Worshipful Master of the Unity and Prudence Masonic Lodge.

Checking on the statement that the works were alterations, a quick visual inspection of the rear of the building reveals the use of Geelong brown-purple bricks, obviously from a date earlier than 1904-05. (Whether or not they date from 1898, and hence the inscription on the parapet, is not known. I suspect the date refers to some phase of the history of the Friendly Societies in Geelong.)

Further interest is added to the building by its inclusion in an English constructional text, *Modern Buildings Their Planning, Construction and Equipment*, written by G.A.T. Middleton and published in London by Caxton Publishing Company c.1912. A chapter contributed by Robert Haddon on 'Australian Planning and Construction' uses the Geelong Dispensary as one of two examples in the short section on shops.

*The Dispensary, Geelong, designed by Messrs. Laird and Barlow shows the planning of a two-storey shop with private side entry to residential apartments.*

*There is a part basement under for storage purposes.*
Good effect has been obtained in the front by the use of coloured glazed tiles. The oriel s over are carried in coke concrete and some bold modelling marks the top pediment, which affords a pleasing sky-line.

Fortunately Haddon also included a plan, section and elevation of the building, and thus allows us to visualise the facade before the subsequent mutilation of the shopfront. Today much of the building's charm, with its contrasting use of red brick and cement render, has been lost by the unfortunate overall blue colour scheme. (The Laird and Buchan contract book records in July 1915 '...painting of Dispensary bldgs, E. Powell, certificat e, 21 July, 1915, tender £30.0.0. It is unlikely that this would have been the date of the repainting of the entire facade; more likely this would refer to interior work, the verandah and perhaps the painting of the bands of cement render.)

The inclusion of the six year old Geelong example by Haddon (his chapter appears to have been written c.1910) is puzzling. The only other example of a shop is one at Moonee Ponds, designed by G.B. Leith. Was their some especial fondness which Haddon attached to the Geelong dispensary? Further research through the records of Laird and Barlow, and in particular their Cash Book, reveals a total of twenty payments (ranging from £2.2.0. to £50.0.0.) to R.J. Haddon in the period 10 August 1904 to 22 March 1916. Unfortunately the name of the job was only recorded in a few instances, such as the prestigious McCabe Doyle Residence (1909) and the Wool Exchange (1905). The first payment by Laird and Barlow to Haddon (of £3.3.0) was on 10 August 1904, coinciding with the Art Nouveau inspired alterations to the facade of the dispensary. It seems highly likely, given the timing of the payment and the glowing reference to the design in Modern Buildings, that Haddon was not only the architect for at least the facade, but also a man with an ego problem.

The Errey thesis (p.250) comments that '...the dispensary was one of the earliest manifestations in Victorian art nouveau architectural decoration'. Sadly this claim must be refuted, in view of the late 1904 date of the facade. However, given the involvement of Haddon and the skilful handling of the facade design, the building is still an important part of our stock of extant Edwardian commercial buildings.

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REFERENCES:

(a) S. Errey, Victorian Architectural Ornament, Fine Arts Thesis, Melbourne University.