

And so the tide went out, leaving mediocrity peppered with eccentricity. Already in the 1880s Henry Handel Richardson had reported that Maldon was highly conventional — ‘not a place for any over-stepping of the moral law’. But she did notice the number of eccentrics in the town. ‘Old Tom’ (actually Thomas Calder), one of the richest men in town, noted for his deafness and profanity; another rich man (R.D. Oswald) who spoke so little that she thought he was dumb; the chemist’s wife who continued to dress in the mode

of the 1850s; the woman who lived deep in the bush and was astonished to see her first piano; the oriental-looking bank official who was never to be seen without gloves; and of course the woman who was to marry the baker but, as recounted in Ian’s essay, was forced to wait 14 years.

It is no surprise, then, that her fiancé, the subject of this exhibition, was another eccentric. It is true that what was trivia when he collected it has now become — especially in the case of the Australiana — rare and valuable

material. But that is due to the effluxion of time more than to the vision of the collector. What you see is a monument to the eccentricity rather than the scholarship of George McArthur, and to the scholarship (but not the eccentricity) of Ian Morrison. I feel more regret than pleasure in declaring it, notionally at least, closed.

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The Baker Revisited

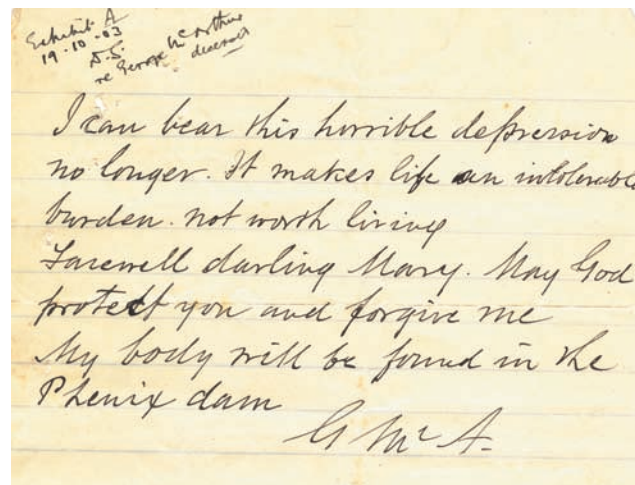
BY IAN MORRISON, Curator Special Collections

Exhibitions are designed to highlight strengths in the University of Melbourne Library’s collections — to show off our ‘treasures’, and also to suggest and encourage research projects. Many, such as *The Baker of Maldon* exhibition, are also timed to coincide with an event or anniversary: our final exhibition for 2003, *The Baker of Maldon*, commemorated the centenary of George McArthur’s bequest to the University.

McArthur remains an enigma. The facts of his life have been painstakingly documented by Mary Lugton, *George McArthur of Maldon: his life and his book collection* (M.Lib thesis, Monash University, 1989), an important study which, regrettably, remains unpublished. Despite Lugton’s efforts, McArthur’s inner life remains obscure. Most of his personal papers were destroyed in a fire some 30 years after his death. One mystery is the timing of his two great journeys, immediately before and after his marriage in 1887.

The Baker of Maldon exhibition was seen by a member of the Maddocks family, who are descended from wards of George and Mary McArthur. As a result, the Maddockses donated several George McArthur documents to the Library, including two manuscript poems (‘Matrimonial’ and ‘Why We Go to Church’), a contemporary copy of his will, and — eloquent in its brevity — his suicide note.

They also allowed us to view some family photographs, group portraits that include George’s fiancée Mary Burke. Intriguingly, these photographs show Mary as tall and wiry. Henry Handel Richardson’s autobiography, *Myself when Young* (1948), recounts her childhood in Maldon, with the romantic tale of ‘our baker’ who had to wait twice seven years to marry his ‘plump, sonsy’ sweetheart. George was 45 when he married,



George McArthur’s suicide note, succinctly stating the reasons for his drastic action.

and it seemed reasonable to identify him with Richardson’s anonymous baker. Richardson scholars have long regarded her memoirs as unreliable, and her use of an obscure adjective like ‘sonsy’ (‘having an agreeably healthy or attractive appearance’ — OED) might be a clue that she re-shaped the baker’s sweetheart to fit her somewhat Chaucerian story.

However, if the protracted engagement happened to some other baker, George’s travels are easier to explain; it is the timing of the marriage that is thrown into question. It probably had more to do with Mary’s financial security, with George away on long and dangerous journeys, than with any need either of them felt to obtain the blessings of church and government for their union.

Copies of the exhibition catalogue *The Baker of Maldon* can be purchased through Special Collections in the Baillieu Library. Phone 03 8344 5380; fax 03 9347 8627, email morrison@unimelb.edu.au