

# The fearless matron beloved by students and soldiers

Walking past The Old Melburnians War Memorial Hall today, students may not realise that a significant item marking our history is buried beneath the building's foundation stone.

Safe in a metal box is a never-circulated sovereign coin that once belonged to former School Matron Mary McKenzie Finlay (1870–1923). The coin was Sister Finlay's talisman during her WWI service, which saw her establish a field hospital in France, and return to Australia with the Royal Red Cross medal.

“ Keep that not only  
as a talisman but to  
be used in case you ever  
are really in want of money.  
I trust you will bring it back  
to me when you return.

Reginald William Ernest Wilmot (OM 1888)



The Old Melburnians War Memorial Hall foundation stone, underneath which is buried former School Matron Mary McKenzie Finlay's sovereign coin presented to her by Reginald William Ernest Wilmot (OM 1888) before she left to serve in WWI.



## EGYPT, FRANCE, AND AUSTRALIA'S FLORENCE NIGHTINGALES

One of twelve children, Sister Finlay came to Melbourne in 1890, aged 20, and began nursing training at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in her mid-20s. Having gained her matron's certificate of technical fitness in 1907, she took up the role of Matron at Melbourne Grammar the next year, and served until the outbreak of WWI.

Granted leave from her position at the School, Sister Finlay was one of the first women to enlist in the Australian Army Nursing Service, and one of the first six Victorian nurses to be deployed overseas. Describing Sister Finlay and her companions as "Florence Nightingales from Australia," *The Herald* quotes one nurse as saying: "We want no privileges. We will go out in the soldierly spirit. What is good enough for the troops is good enough for us."

Before Sister Finlay left Melbourne, Reginald William Ernest Wilmot (OM 1888), then Honorary Secretary of The Old Melburnians Society, presented her with a newly minted sovereign coin. "Keep that not only as a talisman but to be used in case you ever are really in want of money," Mr Wilmot told Sister Finlay. "I trust you will bring it back to me when you return."

Sister Finlay served two years in Egypt and became matron-in-charge of the Ras-el-Tin Convalescent Home in Alexandria before being stationed in Rouen, France. There, she established and led a large military hospital despite "primitive" conditions and shortages of essentials such as water and stoves.

In recognition of her commitment in Rouen, Sister Finlay was awarded the Royal Red Cross (first class), which commemorates exceptional service in military nursing. This medal was first presented to Florence Nightingale herself. "The Royal Red Cross is the highest honour available to an army service nurse," explained *The Herald*. "In point of distinction it ranks with the Victoria Cross."

"[The Rouen hospital] is staffed principally by Victorian nurses," added *The Weekly Times*. "Probably the distinction has been conferred upon [Sister Finlay] because of the capable manner in which she has taken charge of affairs at this centre."

Finlay Place, a street in Gowrie, Canberra, is named in her honour. (All of the suburb's streets are named after members of the Australian Defence Force who have been awarded decorations.) Fittingly, Finlay Place is currently home to the South Canberra Veterans Shed which supports veterans, First Responders and their families.

## RETURNING HOME TO CONTINUE SERVICE

Sister Finlay returned to Australia in 1919, when she again took up the role of Matron at Melbourne Grammar. Having kept the sovereign coin secreted in her clothing throughout her WWI service, she initially asked to donate it to the War Memorial Hall building fund, the campaign for which was underway at the time.

Instead, Wilmot elected to donate an equivalent amount in her honour, and such was the significance of her standing in the Melbourne Grammar community, the coin itself remains beneath the Hall's foundation stone. Buried on Armistice Day, 1927, it rests alongside the book *War Services of Old Melburnians, 1914–1918*, official documents from the day, and a copy of the School's prospectus.

Sister Finlay became seriously ill with what is believed to be breast cancer in 1922 and died in 1923, age 53. Commemorating her life, *The Melburnian* wrote:

"The position of Matron in a Public School is what the holder makes it, and Miss Finlay made the fullest use of her opportunities to do good.

In spite of ill-health and her arduous duties, she found time to make real friends of the boys who passed through the House, and to bring the influence of her personality to help the boys through their difficulties. She was a woman who sacrificed herself and her own inclinations to her work, and gave herself entirely to the service of others.

Many an Old Boy will regret the loss of a friend and a wise counsellor."

Sister Finlay is buried at St Kilda cemetery. Her headstone reads: "A life of service."





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### Do you have news to share?

Do you have any news you would like to share with the Melbourne Grammar School community or a story idea for an upcoming edition of Grammar News? If so, please contact us:

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To report an obituary, please contact School Reception:

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### Erratum

We included a story about Edwin Currie (OM 1881) in the April 2025 edition of Grammar News.

In this article we wrote that his engraved silver trowel was recently gifted back to the School by his great-grandsons – Alan Street (OM 1973) and Philip Street (OM 1973). However, we omitted to include the name of another great-grandson, Geoffrey Street (OM 1971), who should have also been included in this list.

We apologise for this unintentional omission.

Every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information contained within this publication. We apologise should any errors remain.

First Nations readers are advised that this magazine contains images and names of deceased persons.

Melbourne Grammar School respects the privacy of its community members and is bound by the National Privacy Principles under the Commonwealth Privacy Act. For a copy of the School's Privacy Policy, please visit the School's website or contact the School.

# Grammar News

## On the cover

Melbourne Grammar School's Camp Dowd is located on the Banksia Peninsula with direct frontage onto the Gippsland Lakes.

This year marks 25 years since the opening of this outstanding outdoor education facility.

The cover image captures a group of Year 6 students travelling across Lake Victoria from Camp Dowd to a remote boat-access only campsite on Bunga Arm and 90 Mile Beach. There they'll spend one night sleeping in tents on the beach as part of their five-day program based out of Camp Dowd.

The journey offers rich environmental learning experiences. Along the way, students are introduced to aspects of the unique ecosystem of the Lakes, including environmental threats to the Burruman dolphin – an endangered species found only in this region and one other location in Victoria. Spotting these dolphins along with, for example, swans, sea eagles, pelicans, koalas, and gannets often adds an element of wonder to the trip.

Pictured (from left to right) are Melbourne Grammar School Outdoor Educator David Offerman with students William Hansen, Albie Callaghan, Tommy McGirr, Reggie Plowman, Elsie Chen, and Olivia Balakumar.

You can read more about Camp Dowd on pages 26 and 27.

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