

**Remarks by the Head of St Mark's College, Professor Don Markwell,  
for the launch of *A Most Surprising Man: The Life of Victor Marra Newland*,  
The Learning Commons, St Mark's College, Monday 30 November 2020**

On behalf of Léonie and Rod Matheson, a very warm welcome to St Mark's College for this launch by the Hon Alexander Downer AC, speaking by video from Gibraltar, of *A Most Surprising Man: The Life of Victor Marra Newland*, beautifully written by the brilliant story-teller Mary Anne Fitzgerald, who will speak to us by video from Nairobi.

First, as is our well-established practice here, I want to acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional Country of the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plain and pay respect to Elders past, present, and emerging.

For most people here it is of course a very warm welcome *back* to St Mark's, as so many people here have strong links with the College. Whether this is your first or only your latest visit to the College, you are extremely welcome.

Amongst such distinguished company, please forgive me for singling out Mrs Nicky Downer, and members of the Newland family – thank you for being with us – as well as representatives of Wakefield Press, who have published this book so superbly, and who will be available to sell copies of it after these formal proceedings.

As you know, this engaging – in fact, engrossing – book being launched today is a biography of Marra, or Mick, Newland – Léonie Matheson's grandfather.

There are few names as highly honoured in our College community as the names Newland and Matheson. Just to the north-west of where we are now is

the Newland Building, named for Marra Newland's brother, of whom he was proud - Sir Henry Newland, or Hal as he is in this book, whose portrait is in the dining hall below us. And just beyond the Newland Building are the Matheson flats, named in recognition of Rod's outstanding contribution to the College, including – like Sir Henry Newland – as a long-term chair of our College Council.

Victor Marra Newland was born in 1876 on Marra station near Wilcannia, on the Darling River, in outback New South Wales to a family in fact of English pioneers also of the Victor Harbor region of South Australia. He died in Adelaide in 1953, at the age of 76.

Along the way, he fought in the Boer War, tried his hand at business in South Africa, established what became a successful business focussed on big game-hunting safaris in what is now Kenya, wooed and married Elsie Porter of Adelaide and had two daughters with her, organised much of the British Empire military transport logistics in East Africa in World War I, eventually returned with his young family to Adelaide and became a stockbroker and member of State Parliament for North Adelaide – and much more besides.

This book focuses especially on how this son of British settler-pioneers in Australia became a soldier and then an adventurous settler-pioneer in Africa and again a soldier, touching more lightly on his later life.

In their remarks today, Rod Matheson, Mary Anne Fitzgerald, and Alexander Downer will highlight various aspects of the book. I would like to highlight two.

The first is that, in bringing this story of adventure so colourfully alive, Mary Anne Fitzgerald worked with the writings, private and published, of someone also of considerable literary skill, Marra Newland himself – literary skills that seem to run in his family. The book arose from Léonie's chance discovery of

Marra's African letters, photographs, journal, newspaper articles, and other items which his parents had kept. The quotations from them throughout this book show that Marra, like Mary Anne Fitzgerald, could write with flair, energy, and emotional insight and self-revelation.

For example, he wrote of receiving from Adelaide, when broken in pocket and spirit through business failure in Johannesburg, - quote – "a warm note of sympathy from my dear girl, whispering of hope". Later, he writes of shooting elephants near Lake Victoria, and of being, in the star-lit darkness at night – quote - "dimly aware that all around me dwell many strange people and many wild beasts; that after all it is their country; and that I am still the white intruder; I go to my tent and fall asleep" – unquote.

Marra's successful Edwardian courtship from Nairobi of Elsie Porter in Adelaide was through letters, which sadly have not survived. Mary Anne Fitzgerald writes: "However, it is easy to imagine Marra wooing Elsie with gentle persistence over the months and years. His journal entries (far more than the many articles he wrote for newspapers) revealed not only the eloquence of a man of letters but that rare combination that would have been irresistible to a girl of that period: a warm and passionate heart guided by a sensible head."

Léonie has understandably expressed surprise that Elsie's parents allowed their daughter to head off to unknown East Africa with this man of uncertain means: but an unbreakable love had been established between them, and overcame all obstacles.

This leads to the other point I want to make: as well as being a tale of adventure, of a young man – a product of the Victorian era and its values - seeking his way in an imperial world, underlying this book is also a quest for love. The striking cover photo shows a bush picnic with Marra looking

adoringly towards Elsie. Through the book, Mary Anne Fitzgerald refers to how much he wished he had sisters as well as brothers, and how the absence of sisters perhaps helped lead him to idolise women as, in her words, “unapproachable madonnas”. Marra and Elsie’s daughter Margaret, Léonie’s mother, wrote of “his devotion to my mother, whom he cherished”; and that love, and his love for his daughters and for their children, conspicuously including Léonie, echoes through the book.

In her acknowledgements at the end of the book, Mary Anne Fitzgerald writes: “Léonie Matheson and her husband Rod are the driving force behind this book. It is their love for Marra that has brought it to fruition.”

Having greatly enjoyed reading this book, I for one am delighted that it has, and I enthusiastically recommend this book to you.

The Hon Rod Matheson AM QC, of course, hardly needs introduction here. He is, as you know, a former Justice of the Supreme Court of South Australia, and pillar of St Mark’s College for decades, as well as Léonie’s devoted husband, and very dear friend to so many of us.

It is now my great pleasure to call on Rod Matheson to speak.

Many thanks indeed, Rod.

To speak about this exciting story of Marra Newland, we are about to play a message from its author, Mary Anne Fitzgerald, from her home in Nairobi. It would be hard to imagine anyone better placed to write this story: As Rod Matheson mentioned, Mary Anne Fitzgerald is the author of 11 books on Africa, and has covered eastern and West Africa for such distinguished publications as *The Economist* and *The Financial Times*.

She has worked in sustainable development and women's advancement in Kenya, bringing human rights abuses – such as child soldiers in Ethiopia – to international attention, and, more controversially, before hunting was banned in Kenya, working for a professional hunter.

Ladies and gentlemen – Mary Anne Fitzgerald.

Many thanks, across the miles, to Mary Anne Fitzgerald. Didn't I tell you what a great story-teller she is?

Now officially to launch this book, it is my pleasure to introduce two recorded messages from the Hon Alexander Downer AC, speaking from Gibraltar.

As you know, Alexander Downer is Australia's longest-serving Minister for Foreign Affairs, serving throughout the Howard Government from 1996 to 2007, and was later High Commissioner to London from 2014 to 2018.

As you may know, Mr Downer's links with this College go back to its founding. The College's first building, bought for the College's opening in 1925, is in fact

Downer House, the home of his grandparents, Sir John and Lady Downer. Prominent within Downer House is a plaque recording Mr Downer's unveiling of a photograph of Sir John Downer and the other members of the drafting committee for the Australian Constitution at the 1897 Australasian federal convention held here in Adelaide. In the pond you walked past to come into this building is a statue of St Mark, and a small lion, the College symbol, donated by Mr Downer's father, Sir Alexander Downer, in 1964, in memory of his father.

Mr Downer's links with the Newlands go back also to his grandfather: Marra and Sir Henry Newland's father, Simpson Newland, served as Treasurer in Sir John Downer's first Government in South Australia in the 1880s.

Ladies and gentlemen – the Hon Alexander Downer AC.

Many thanks to Alexander Downer for his insightful remarks, highlighting some of the key themes in this book.

I am sure that we are all grateful to him, and to Mary Anne Fitzgerald for her evocative story-telling, both in her video and in this book, and to Rod Matheson for what he has said today, and to Rod and Léonie Matheson for their initiative and drive in the genesis of this book and for their hospitality here today.

Would you join me in expressing our thanks and congratulations?

You will have noticed that Mary Anne Fitzgerald gave special thanks in her video message, as she did in the acknowledgements in the book, to help she

received from the South Australian history, Tony Stimson, who is here today. Many thanks and congratulations to him also.

I would also like to thank everyone who has contributed to organising this afternoon's launch, including a number of my dedicated staff colleagues and several of our wonderful students, all coordinated by our Director of Advancement, Amanda Crawley – to whom many thanks.

Now, before inviting you to enjoy Léonie and Rod's kind hospitality further, I need simply to remind you of two things:

- first, that COVID restrictions mean that you will need to be served the food and drinks on offer, and you will then need to be seated while enjoying them; and
- secondly, that Wakefield Press will be happy to sell you a copy of this book, which again I most warmly recommend to you.

You will not be disappointed.

That brings our formal proceedings to a conclusion. Thank you so much for being here. Please enjoy the hospitality that awaits.