

A hall, a library, better crops, orchids, a professor – and a celebrated vessel

Peter Last

South Australia has gained in many ways from benefactors who left no direct descendants. Sir Walter Watson Hughes married Miss Lipson, daughter of the first harbour-master, but they had no children. He sits in bronze before the Mitchell building to display the munificence which created Adelaide University. Sir Thomas Elder was childless, as was Sir Samuel Way, followed by Sir Edward and Lady Hayward in our own time. Yachting in general and the Squadron in particular were greatly advanced by the generosity of Sir Mark Mitchell and Norman Howard.

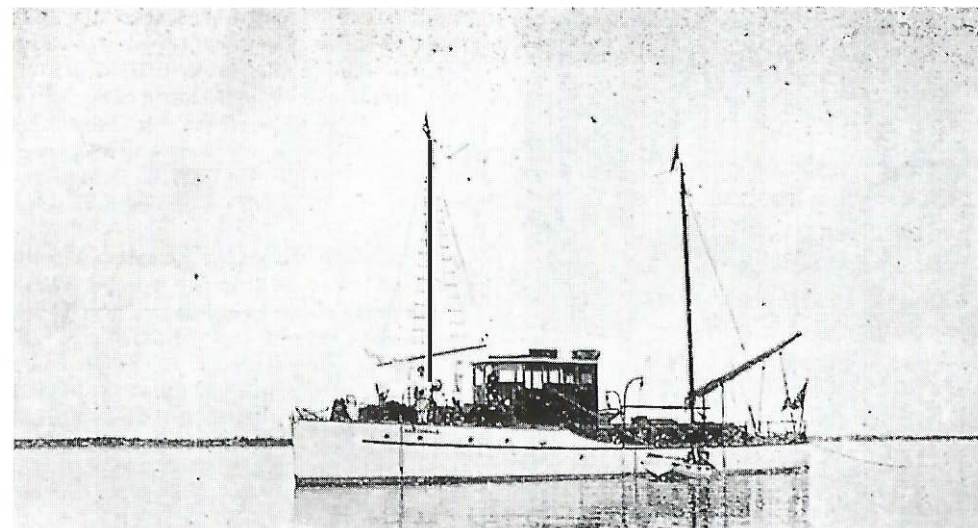
Of the Martindale Mortlocks it can be said that they came, they stretched themselves widely and they vanished. They did so without ostentation and with due regard for the obligations of great wealth and extensive properties. Although men of the first two generations served in Parliament, their names do not appear in the standard works of Pike and Grenfell Price, nor in *John's Notable Australians and Who is Who in Australasia* of 1908. Loyau's *The Representative Men of South Australia* (1883) does not include either a Mortlock or a Tennant.

William Ranson Mortlock settled in Adelaide in 1844, but when one of his two flour mills was burned down he moved to Yalluna Station surrounding Tumby Bay. He added land at and beyond Coffin Bay, and acquired about half of the Flinders Ranges. On Yudnapinna alone he sheared 100,000 sheep a year from 1,600 square miles of land. His wife was a sister of Andrew Tennant, a man with similar vast holdings in Australia and New Zealand. WR Mortlock was prominent in horse racing and was a MHA from 1868 to 1884.

South Australia's best-known country mansion is Martindale Hall at Mintaro. This was

built in 1880 by Edmund Bowman (the Second), but he over-reached himself and was obliged to sell the property at great loss to the newly married William Andrew Tennant Mortlock in 1892. (The price of £30,000 was less than the cost of erecting the building, not counting the land.) WAT was the elder son of WR and married his cousin Rosye Tennant in the most lavish such event of the day in St Peter's Church Glenelg on 30 January 1891. The Governor was the Earl of Kintore (he of the cup and the avenue). His ADC married another Tennant daughter in the same ceremony. The brides' gowns of "rich brocaded satin of artistic simplicity" cost £25 a yard, and their father gave each of his daughters wedding gifts of £20,000. The third subsequently received the same. WAT was elected to his father's old seat of Flinders in 1896 and continued the family tradition of horse racing. He holidayed on his property at Coffin Bay, where he kept two motor launches and the yacht *Whynot*. Here he entertained large parties of similar keen fishermen.

In the third generation the elder son was John Tennant Mortlock. He was born in 1894 and married late, with no children. Frederick Ranson Mortlock died unmarried at Colombo in 1936 at the age of 35. The name of the Martindale Hall branch of the family is extinct, as is the direct line of Bowmans. JT Mortlock was educated at St Peter's College, and being clever and studious went on to Cambridge and the Inner Temple before the death of his father in 1913 forced him home to inherit and manage the estates. These amounted to hundreds of square miles in dry country; plus about 40,000 acres inside Goyder's Line. Grange Farm of 300 acres was soon sold to become first Mitcham Army Camp and then Colonel Light Gardens. The jewel in his crown was Martindale Hall, where he maintained a sheep stud and was a somewhat diffident local squire. Although he was less sporty than his father and his younger



The first Martindale.

brother Ranson, he became a notable shot, a cultivator of orchids and a figure in the local yachting world.

So much for the facts of JT Mortlock's life. Fortunately for posterity, he employed for twelve years as chauffeur, RJ Thrum, who left an account in his own hand of his experiences. It is very well written (in both senses) and is every bit as fascinating as Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*. There are also four albums of his photographs and large quantities of cine film (in the Mortlock Library, of course).

According to Ray Broomhill's *Unemployed Workers: A Social History of the Great Depression in Adelaide*, Holdens produced 50,000 car bodies in 1926–27. In 1931–32 output was 3,245. The number of men employed in South Australian factories fell from 32,214 in 1928 to 18,932 in 1932. In that year the national unemployment rate was 29.0%, but Broomhill says that in South Australia it was higher.

Jeff Thrum was born in 1904, and in 1929 he was a fitter and turner at Holdens, Woodville. He was put off with 400 others, and, in spite of limited driving experience

and not having a licence, succeeded in becoming chauffeur to Mr Mortlock. He was modest about this, but since 200 others also applied he obviously had personal qualities which made him stand out. He began with a Fiat, a Crossley limousine and a big Minerva, taking Mr Mortlock to and from his city office and his various properties. Subsequently they acquired a 1936 semi-automatic six-cylinder Reo and a Packard straight eight sedan. Mrs Mortlock and her chauffeur preferred a Rolls Royce. Jeff Thrum specially adapted a 1938 Ford utility for spot-light shooting. He became photographer, general assistant and companion to "the Boss".

JT Mortlock commissioned the first *Martindale*, a motor yacht of 65 feet, which cruised as a relatively new boat in 1928–29. She was not formally registered until 1930, but did not last long. There was something profoundly wrong with the timbers, perhaps worm or dry rot. Undeterred, in 1932 Mrs Mortlock launched a second vessel of the same name and style, which was built by RT Searles and Sons of Birkenhead at a cost of £4,000. She was 66 feet (20m) long with a beam of 14 ft 3 in (4.3m) and a draught of 5 ft 10 in (1.5m). More than thirty knees were



Jeff Thrum.

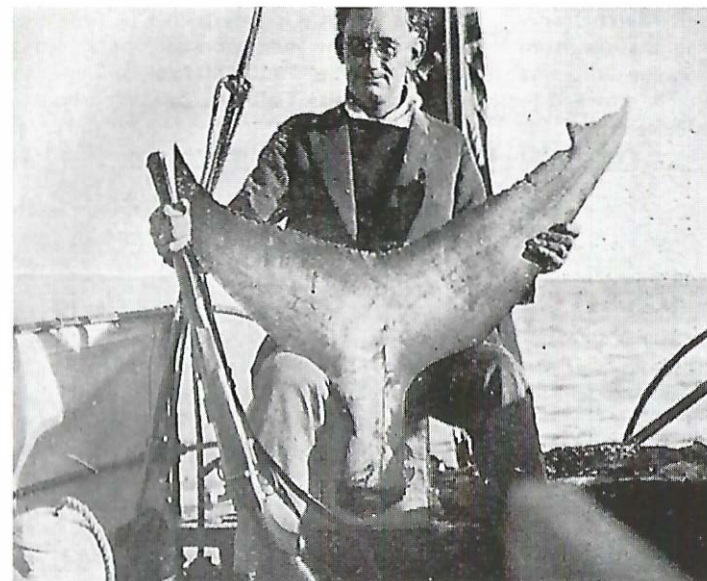
made from myall timber felled at Yudnapinna. A nautical luxury for the times was an electric refrigerator, as well as "a wireless set capable of picking up all Australian broadcasting stations". (The ABC was founded in 1932, but the wireless had been popular for ten years or so before that. Adelaide Radio began transmission in 1912.) *Martindale* was fitted with a full-size bath and hot and cold water. The steering wheel of teak included timber from HMCS *Protector*. There was a twin cylinder "semi-diesel" Petter engine, which was replaced with a six cylinder 100 hp Gardner "full diesel". A heat and soundproof bulkhead separated the three crew in the forecabin from the passengers. They were RA ("Bert") Tapley, a former ketch skipper; deck hand Harry Moules, a retired petty officer RN; and Rocco Quinn, "engineer and general hand". Rocco's nephew Bob became a notable footballer and Magarey Medallist. He was awarded the Military Medal for gallantry at Tobruk and commissioned on the field. As a schoolboy he made a copper kettle, which

remained on *Martindale* thereafter. JT Mortlock was Commodore of the Port Adelaide Sailing Club from 1931 to 1933. A photograph taken by Jeff Thrum of Squadron Opening Day 1936 shows Mr Mortlock's mother clutching a large handbag and wearing a fur. She was dressed as though she might as well have been shopping in the city.

Jeff Thrum wrote that a big interest was the restricted class hydroplane named *Wizzo*. "There were about twelve boats in the state in this class, and he had plenty of competition. I was his passenger, and the experiences were exhilarating. My job was to keep the pressure up in the petrol tank. *Wizzo's* top speed was 45 miles per hour. He won his fair share of races."

They followed the measured life of those with great wealth and consequent responsibilities, but rejecting ostentation. This included the Windsor Hotel for Melbourne Cup week, as well as journeys to Queensland, the Sydney sheep sales and a tourist trip to New Zealand in 1939. These were recorded by Jeff Thrum on still and movie films. The latter were used for fund-raising events for charities.

"When I started work for Mr Mortlock [in 1929] he had a Graflex $\frac{1}{4}$ plate box camera. I soon learned to operate it. [Mr Thrum was given duplicates of all prints.] Then he bought a 16 mm movie outfit: camera, projector, screen, the works. In 1936 Kodak colour film came on the market. Sorry to say, in a short time the colour faded, and it was not until about 1940 that we had some really good colour film. The boss never did much talking in public about the films. All he would do was introduce me, saying I had taken the films and knew more about them. One important show was in the presence of His Excellency the Governor and his wife. Well, there I was in my one and only navy suit, and all the VIP's in the audience in their dinner jackets." Another show was for Port Lincoln High School. "I got quite a kick out of talking to such a large audience, house full." That raised enough money to buy the school its first movie projector.



J.T. Mortlock contemplating a meal of shark tail soup.

"Every year we went to Coffin Bay by MV *Minnipa* from Port Adelaide with the car or utility aboard. Meanwhile, the yacht would leave Port Adelaide a week before and make her way over, weather permitting. She had a permanent anchorage at the Bay. The crew would be increased to four, [with] the cook. The *Tarcoola*, a 30-foot boat, was kept permanently at Coffins. She was a real old-timer, but a good work boat. She was propelled by a twin-cylinder upright petrol engine. [She] was always used when we went round to Dutton Bay to dredge for oysters." Jeff Thrum probably didn't know that *Tarcoola* participated in the first motor launch race conducted by the Squadron on 13 February 1904. "Of the four launches, the *Valeria* was a non-starter, the *Tarcoola* was late in getting away and the *Koonunga* was disqualified." (*The Advertiser*) *Coryphee* won by default, but Mr W Fisher refused the prize of £3/3/-. *Koonunga* was disqualified because Mr Seymour Bagot briefly left the helm, which was taken by a non-member. *Tarcoola* was then owned by Hon Andrew Tennant. The vessels were powered by what were then called oil engines, which ran on petrol or benzine.

Jeff Thrum continued, "At Coffin Bay Mr Mortlock had the figurehead of the *Glen Park*, a ship which had been wrecked on the South Australian coast. It was standing in front of his house, flanked by a pair of whalebone jaws. I gave the old lady a coat of paint every year, and she always looked in the best of health." They regularly fished at Black Springs, "a few miles down towards the entrance". There "the Boss" could get his favourite fish — sweep. Usually a week was spent fish-

ing in Spencer Gulf. "One time when we were anchored at Dangerous Reef, I have seen four large sharks swimming round: four different species. We always visited Thistle Island, owned by Skipper Tapley's brother." Here they would shoot a turkey for the yacht. In early 1939 the celebrated American fishing publicist and novelist Zane Grey came to Port Lincoln to catch white pointer sharks. Jeff Thrum took his staff spotlight shooting, and was proud to be photographed with Zane Grey when he had his first aeroplane flight to return to Sydney.

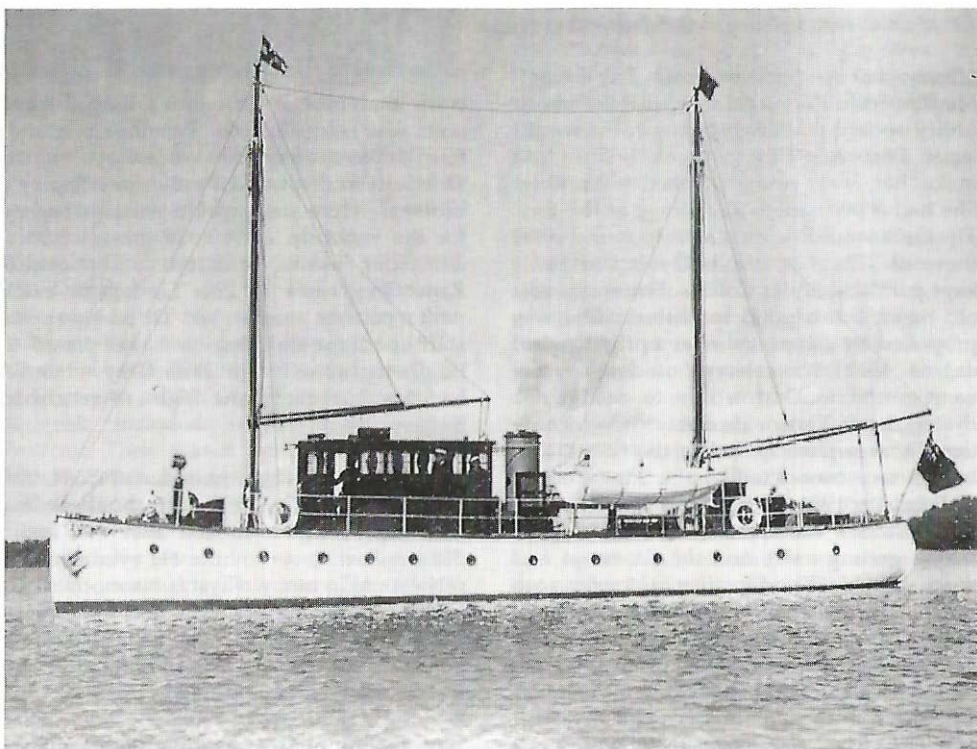
"Mr Mortlock was a wonderful boss, the best employer I have had throughout my working years. He looked after me, and I did my best to serve him. He even came to rely on me in many ways. If his mother was with him, the chauffeurs would dine apart. If there was only Mr Mortlock and myself, he would always sit me with him, and I had the run of the menu, just as he did."

With the outbreak of war in 1939 there were inevitable changes. Mr Thrum learned to cope with the cumbersome gas producers

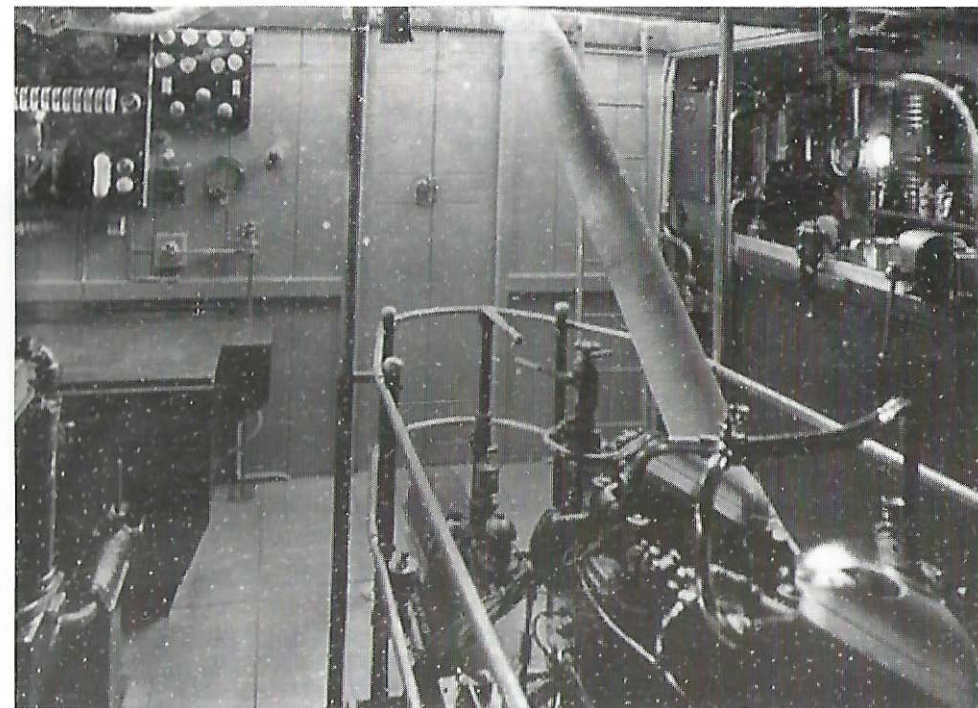
fitted to the cars. They used charcoal specially made at Yudnapinna station from mulga and myall. "Many a swear word was spoken during that period." He returned to his trade in 1941, and subsequently Mr Mortlock married the secretary of Mr Scarfe, his manager. Sadly, he died not long after that. "I'm afraid my boss was a chain smoker. He used to smoke what were called 'King Whips' five inches in length. He would order 5,000 [and] he had his initials JTM in gold lettering on each one. There is no doubt heavy smoking helped shorten his life span, while in his 50s. He left me enough money to buy my first car, a Hillman."

In 1943 MY *Martindale* was requisitioned by the RAN for air-sea rescue service in the Pacific islands, acquiring the prefix ASKV instead of the more familiar HMAS. The

skipper was the former owner of *Beth*, Reg Webb. A crew member was long-standing RSAYS member Paddy Malone, and another local was Keith Collison. Paddy participated in the voyage from Port Adelaide to Sydney, where three months was spent on a refit. He was gunner of the twin 0.5" machine guns mounted on the foredeck. He fired them only a couple of times in practice, and in his time *Martindale* saw no action. He stayed with the boat for the journey from Cairns to Milne Bay, and then was mostly in the D'Entrecasteaux and Trobriand Islands. The people were bright and friendly. Paddy moved to a similar small ship whose name he could not recall, and *Martindale* went on as far as the Philippines, at one time transporting General McArthur. On 1 October 1944 the crew of the launch *Malata* wrote a letter to express their gratitude for rescue, but Paddy had left



The second *Martindale* wearing the burgee of the Commodore of Port Adelaide Sailing Club, probably 1931 or 1932. (By courtesy of PASC)



The engine room of *Martindale*.

Martindale by then. Norman Howard was in the area at this time.

JT Mortlock died on 15 March 1950. *Martindale* was sold and passed through several hands. She was brought into our pool by the Holsten family, and at one time was owned by Mr Puckridge, mayor of Port Lincoln. In 1984 she had moved to Sydney, where she was being restored by Sir Victor Nash and Neil Buckley. In that year Paddy Malone participated in a forty year reunion, at which he produced the tattered white ensign which she flew throughout her naval service. He believes that the vessel is still in the same hands.

Before and after his death JT Mortlock was a generous donor to good causes. The beneficiaries were the University of Adelaide, the State Library, the Art Gallery, the Church of England and Urrbrae

Agricultural High School. The JT Mortlock orchid collection and its orchid house were given by Mrs Mortlock to the Adelaide Botanic Garden. His mother had already endowed in memory of his younger brother the Ranson Mortlock Trust devoted to research on soil erosion, to which he added more. His widow's bequest led to the Chair of Medicine being designated the Mortlock Professorship. Even though there are no descendants, the name will endure indefinitely.

Jack Wood suggested this article and provided most of the background material. I thank Jeff Thrum's sons, the Mortlock Library and Paddy Malone for their help in its preparation. Quotations from Jeff Thrum's autobiographical record have been conflated.

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