

“Guinness Down Under” at Burkes Pass

The story of how the iconic brew and the Guinness family came to Australia and New Zealand in the mid- 1800s was presented recently by author and family historian Rod Smith. Accompanied by his wife Glennis, they were hosted by The Burkes Pass Heritage Trust to introduce his new book to a good turnout at Burkes Pass. First launched in Parliament Buildings, it was a contrast to come to the little pioneer church at Burkes Pass. Some members of the audience later unexpectedly revealed their own connections to the family. Afterward local artist Julie Greig provided a warm welcome at the Burkes Pass Gallery for refreshments and the Burkes Brewing Company generously treated the group to a tasting of their range of local craft beer.

The book was inspired over 15 years ago by Glennis’s 6th generation Guinness connection. The never-before-told story, records how four grandsons of Arthur and Olivia Guinness (founders of the famous stout brewery), made a new life Down Under, where many of their descendants remain to this day. One of these grandsons was Michael John Burke. The background to their stories is set in Ireland when Arthur Guinness started his brewery in the mid 1700’s at a time when drinking ale was safer than the risk of drinking water. Produced in Dublin for over 250 years, three million pints are brewed there each day, and breweries in 50 countries produce the famous stout. An order from Wellington Hospital in the 1880s records its use as an early health supplement and many other reminders of the Guinness and Burke names remain today such as the Guinness Book of Records and the Guinness name in PGG.



Michael Burke is of particular interest to us as his name is given to our township and area and he is credited with the European discovery of the pass into the Mackenzie basin around 1855-56. ‘For Michael John Burke emigration to NZ must have seemed like a huge gust of fresh air. The eldest son of a notable Galway family he had status and influence, reasonable income, but no clear long-term prospects. He was surrounded by Burke relatives with their expectations: and Ireland still struggling after five years of the Famine, haunted by poverty and despair. When Michael arrived and saw the Canterbury plains wide open before him waiting for men with energy and money there were opportunities to take, and take them he did’.

<https://guinnessdownunderanz.co.nz>

He was undoubtedly an intrepid explorer and many properties in Canterbury had his hand in their establishment. In the Mackenzie and South Canterbury/North Otago area were 'Raincliff' (then called South Downs), Sherwood Downs, Waitangi near Lake Aviemore, two runs by the Ohau River and southern Lake Ohau and Makarora and 'The Forks' in Wanaka and 'Longslip' in the Ahuriri.

'He was long renowned in early Christchurch society for his colourful personality and penchant for quoting Latin poetry... Not even a fall into quicksand could slow him down. Following a whirlwind courtship Michael married the beautiful Maria Minchin, but after just eight years together he died of heart disease. She lived on for 59 years and watched war and sickness almost snuff out her grandchildren's generation.' The ten grandchildren all died without family, five of these were the casualties of war.



Woven through the book are the imaginary reminiscences and letters of Sarah Anne Guinness (Glennis's great grandmother) who coming from a comfortable Irish vicarage, travelled with her family to Melbourne and later married, experiencing the hardships of life as a colonial wife and mother, in the remote north of New Zealand and Fiji. This adds a personal and heartfelt thread to the factual history.

The book has been meticulously researched, with pictures and information from over 300 people, forty libraries and archives here in NZ and overseas. It is beautifully written, described as utterly engaging and 'a book to be savoured, not just by those who love their pint of Guinness, but by all those interested in how Irish culture and tastes have shaped and continue to shape the lives of New Zealanders and Australians.'

Copies of "Guinness Down Under" are available at many book shops and also at reduced cost by contacting Eyeglass Press directly at guinnessdu@xtra.co.nz and at The Burkes Pass Gallery.

