AUSTRALIAN LEBANESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.
founded 2000

The official newsletter of the Australian Lebanese Historical Society
Issue Number: 93 November 2025 PO Box 342 Coogee NSW 2034
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As the reports in this newsletter attest, 2025 has been a busy year. Our new book *Of Lebanese Heritage: A Collection of Memories* is now with the printer. Thank you to the forty-five contributors. Special thanks to the editors, Margaret Clapham and Yvonne Matta, who have devoted many hours to get the manuscript finalised. We look forward to launching the book early next year.

As editor of the newsletter, I take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed articles and reviews this year. It is these contributions that make the newsletter of interest.

Although the focus of the ALHS is the history of Lebanese in Australia, it is important at this time to acknowledge many of our members who are concerned for the welfare of family and friends in Lebanon. The future is uncertain, and this increases the importance of our efforts to record Australian-Lebanese history and identify the culture and traditions that have been preserved or lost through the migration process.

The ALHS financial year and ALHS membership run from January to December, so it is time to renew your ALHS membership for 2026. You can do this via the ALHS website, and we encourage you to do so. The most straightforward way to renew online is by paying with a credit card. A reminder will be sent to members on 1 December. Please wait for the reminder before renewing your membership. If you have paid for more than one year of membership, you will not receive a reminder until the last year of your paid membership. Please get in touch if you have a question. At only $30.00 per calendar year, our membership fee is very reasonable. The Society relies on membership fees to fund its activities. We look forward to your continuing support.

As another year nears conclusion, we wish you and your families a safe and happy festive season and look forward to continuing to work together in 2026 to research, record and share our Australian Lebanese history.

Dr Anne Monsour Editor

Date Claimers

Toowoomba's Lebanese community and Lebanon's Independence Day 2025

For many years members of the Toowoomba Lebanese Community gathered to celebrate this important day–mainly outdoors. This year a few members of our community came together, and we decided it was time to celebrate again, this time indoors. People are invited to celebrate our beautiful Lebanese heritage and culture by coming to enjoy a delicious lunch, a bit of music, and the warm spirit of Lebanon.

Date: Sunday 23rd of November 11:30am – 4:00pm
Place: St Anthony's Community Centre, Memory Street, Harristown

Dress is casual or come in a touch of colour – red, white or green. Those attending are invited to bring a plate of finger food to share. For information, contact Gabrielle Saide at gabriellesaide@outlook.com or phone 0402 307150

A Brief Overview of the migration of Lebanese Diaspora from the Coastal City of Tripoli, the mountain village of Bsharri, and Adjacent Villages, to Dunedin, New Zealand

Richard Joseph, QSM, President – Cedars of Lebanon Club, Dunedin, NZ

The first record of Lebanese presence in Otago, New Zealand, surfaces in the contemporary records of - a lone hawker named Gypren Hannah in January 1888. Following this initial trace, others arrived in a slow trickle, that became a steady stream by the turn of the century. They sailed into a New Zealand already bristling with anti-immigrant sentiment, swept up and categorized under the same umbrella of hostility that spawned the anti-Chinese legislation and its resulting restrictions against "Asiatic" peoples.

A Foothold Against the Tide

To navigate this unwelcoming landscape, the newcomers instinctively forged deep, resilient communal bonds. This tight-knit network served as their base of operations, the vital anchorage from which they could venture into the wider, often alien, community. They were shrewd in their adaptation, winning friends and admiration not through entitlement, but through sheer industry and impeccable presentation. Their strategy was one of soft power: immaculate dress, courteous manners, and a service ethic that steadily captured the loyalty of their customer base.

Two Streams of Migration

The earliest generation of migrants flowed from two distinct geographical and sectarian wells. The first hailed from Tripoli on the coast; the second, from the mountain village of Bsharri and its environs. This geographical divide was underscored by a deep sectarian difference: the Bsharri contingent were Maronite Christians, while the Tripoli migrants were Orthodox Christians.

In Dunedin, these differences manifested in their worship. The Maronites found their spiritual home within the Catholic structure of St Joseph's Cathedral. The Orthodox Lebanese, however, initially worshipped at St Matthews Anglican Church before their community, in 1911, established their own sanctuary, St Michael's in South Dunedin.

My own paternal line belongs to the Maronite stream; my grandparents arrived in 1907. Thus, this account becomes primarily an exploration of the Dunedin Maronite community from the late 1940's onward, recalled as best as my own memory and family stories can serve.

The Heart of the Community

Before the official establishment of the Cedar Club in 1946, the community's social life revolved around spontaneous, familiar gatherings. They would converge on "Bell Tea Corner" for impromptu meetings after Sunday Mass, a ritual that anchored their week, or they would host one another in the warm, crowded intimacy of their homes—simple, vital gatherings that kept the spirit of the community alive.

The Establishment of the Cedar Club

About 10 years after the Cedar Club was established the first clubrooms were purchased. It was an old, wooden two storey building that was situated in the 'Lebanese precinct' in Perth Avenue. It may have been old and run down, but our community was very proud that through years of fund raising and donations they finally had a place to call their own.

Fast forward to 1962 and new clubrooms were purchased. A few years later, a licence was obtained to run a public 'housie' which was well patronised and provided cash flow to build a large hall onto the side of the existing property. The addition of the hall ensured the club became the hub for our community where community and public events such as weddings, christenings, funerals, community gatherings and corporate events were held. The hire of the hall was free for club members, but it provided an additional revenue stream for the club.

Those premises were occupied for almost forty years when the decision was made to sell our beloved clubrooms because they had outlasted their reason for being and were barely being used. That decision struck a major blow to our community. In many ways it felt like we had lost our identity. We had lost something that symbolised our community.

In the face of this perceived loss, the committee deemed it important to leave a legacy to our people. To show that the Lebanese community had contributed in a meaningful way to the growth and prosperity of Dunedin. That we were represented in the major professions, commercial enterprises, trades, and the workforce in general.

To mark the end of an era we held an event called The Gathering in 2011. People who had links to Dunedin came from all over the globe to celebrate our culture, our identity and a bygone era. Below are our club's more notable legacies, which include:

Cedars of Lebanon Grove, Botanic Gardens, Dunedin, NZ

- **Cedars of Lebanon Grove** at the Dunedin Botanic Garden consisting of a triumvirate of a 900kg bronze cedar cone, a genuine Cedrus Lebani tree and a seat made from cedar wood.
- **Two published books** – Lebanon's Children and Scattered Cedars
- **Dunedin Lebanese Community digitisation centre** at the Dunedin Public library.
- **Certified Oral Histories** by several members of our community. Copies in the national library in Wellington, Te Papa, Toitu Otago settler's museum, Dunedin public library and various other libraries around New Zealand, together with other DVD's and other verbal recordings.
- Plaques strategically placed around areas where the Lebanese community lived and the location of what were our clubrooms, as well as St Joseph's Cathedral
- **Annual flying of the Lebanese flag** from the Mayoral balcony of the Dunedin civic centre on Lebanon's Independence Day.
- **"Our Voices"** audio/visual exhibition at Toitu Otago settler's museum.
- Memorabilia reflecting our culture and heritage
- Wreaths laid on ANZAC day.
- Generic Testing, National Geographic
- **The Gathering –** an event that was held to celebrate our culture, our heritage and our identity. People came from far reaches of the globe including the United Kingdom, United States of America, Kuwait, Australia and all parts of New Zealand.
- **Cedars of Lebanon Website** and Facebook to keep us connected to the world and our diaspora connected with us.

Our community is now smaller, less structured, and less defined than in years gone by. The Cedars of Lebanon Club still exists but on a smaller scale than in the past.

With hearts rooted in Aotearoa, New Zealand and souls shaped by Lebanese heritage, we proudly celebrate the beautiful blend of cultures that makes us who we are; New Zealanders of Lebanese descent.

BRISBANE 100 – ANNIVERSARY OF BRISBANE CITY COUNCIL

Antonia Simpson

Brisbane 100 Flyer, 2025

The Queensland Branch of the ALHS accepted an invitation to participate in a Brisbane 100 celebration. The Lord Mayor opened the day with a speech explaining how the various town councils were amalgamated into the largest city council in Australia. The celebration took place in a reception room in Brisbane City Hall, and consisted of various community groups presenting small displays, and short speeches illustrated with slide shows at intervals during the day. Dr Anne Monsour spoke about the history of Lebanese in Brisbane.

The allotted spaces were rather small, but with a bit of juggling, we were able to fit four banners from the "A Continuous Thread exhibition". Five of us took turns to answer questions and engage with people about the ALHS, and particularly the history of Lebanese in Brisbane. There were always people stopping to read the banners. They proved to be very good conversation starters.

We were placed between Celtic associations and the Oral History Queensland booth. The OHQ volunteer interviewed many attendees recording their memories of growing up in Brisbane or moving there later in life. Three of us managed to have our story recorded and these stories will become another part of our Australian Lebanese history.

Participating in this event was a positive way to increase an awareness of the history of Lebanese in Brisbane.

Yvonne Matta wearing an embroidered jacket bought in Lebanon in the 1960s, Brisbane City Hall, 2025

The Team from L-R: Antonia Simpson, Yvonne Carrigan, Anne Monsour, Yvonne Matta, Violet Torbey and Anne Thacker

ALHS 25TH ANNIVERSARY LUNCH, BRISBANE

Yvonne Ashkar Matta

ALHS members, family and friends at the 25th Anniversary Lunch, Brisbane, 2025

On Saturday 18 October 2025, a group of 50 people celebrated the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Australian Lebanese Historical Society. In true Lebanese style, they were gathered to share a delicious luncheon mezza prepared by the Baba Ganouj restaurant at Brisbane's Southbank.

Dr Anne Monsour, President of the Queensland branch of the ALHS, welcomed everyone and acknowledged Anthony Torbey, Honorary Consul for Lebanon in Queensland and a great supporter and advocate for the Society. Anne then spoke briefly about the history and achievements of the ALHS.

Recognising that the Lebanese were generally ignored in the recording of Australian history, the ALHS has for 25 years facilitated the recording and telling of the Australian Lebanese story by developing its collection, encouraging research, producing publications and exhibitions, and organising regular events that include the wider community as well as ALHS members.

Chadia and Martin Chalmers and Anne Thacker, Brisbane, 2025

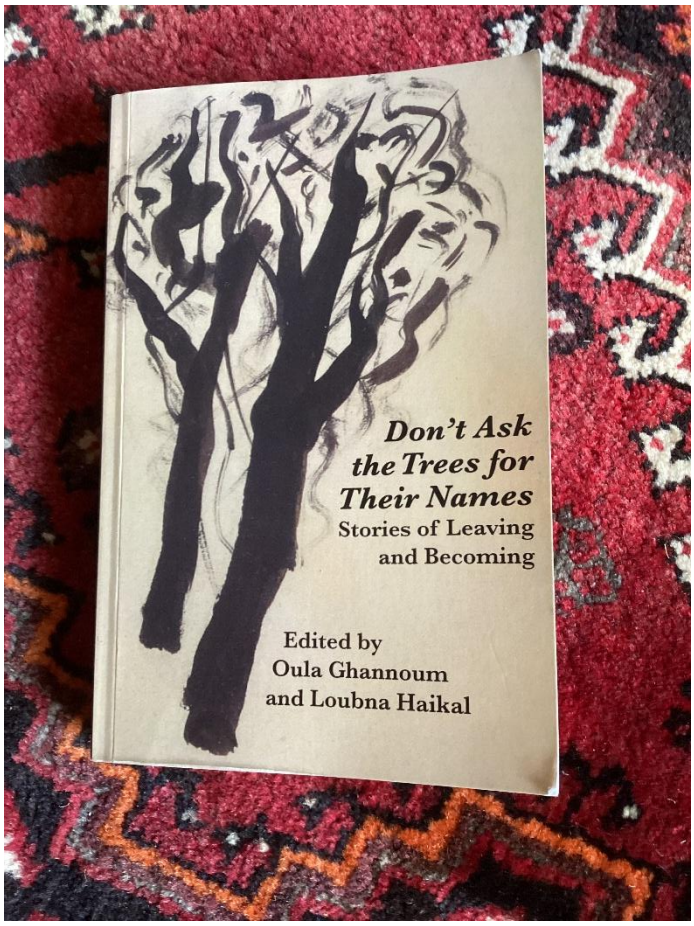
For several months, a group of member-volunteers have been working to bring together a book of writings from some 45 contributors who celebrate their Lebanese heritage. Guests were treated to several short samples of the contents. We are looking forward to launching the book in the New Year. Situating the experiences of people of Lebanese heritage within

the Australian story, the contributions in this book, *Of Lebanese Heritage: A Collection of Memories*, also reveal a deep and ongoing connection with their ancestral homeland.

ALHS members, family and friends at the 25th Anniversary Lunch, Brisbane, 2025

Don’t Ask the Trees for Their Names

Cecile Yazbek



Covid lockdown was a time of isolation, some anxiety and too much time to dwell unproductively, even wallow in the past. Nine women, Muslim, Christian, atheist, career-driven mothers, full-time academics coalesced into an online literary salon.

Meeting weekly on Zoom for more than a year, page by page, they wrote and shared in Arabic their mother-tongue. Loubna describes it as the language she’d left behind in the wrench of migration and anxiety of re-settlement. Intimacy with one another and personally, emerging secrets were shared and held back. Fears of exposure were contained. Honesty honed in this supportive community has burnished these voices with an authenticity that moved, even shook me. What they had begun, continued while Israel’s disproportionate response to an attack in October 2023, escalated into a continuing genocide in Gaza.

Those who cannot take up the pen will take up the sword. Women frequently turn the sword on themselves. In the Introduction, Loubna Haikal, a medical doctor reflects about her writing instead of doctoring during the pandemic: ‘Literature would never save a patient in an ICU.’ However, I believe that literature can keep people out of hospital altogether.

From Syria, Sudan, Lebanon and Palestine these women had come to Australia, mostly unwillingly because of the Nakba (1948), the Naksa (1967) violent dispossession and occupation. European colonisers remain in Palestine to this day. These occupiers are hostile neighbours to Syria and Lebanon causing wars, destroying villages and dividing little Lebanon into two distinct demographic regions: North and Israeli-occupied South where some of these women or their parents were born into initially idyllic lives, immersed in the natural world and seasons.

Alex Miller has written of the lasting connection between nature and the human imagination, evident in these yearned-for histories of childhoods spent close to the earth. With deep nostalgia, they tell us of their villages, neighbourhoods, culture and communities mostly shattered by war. The consistent quality of what they produced is a tribute to the strength and determination of each writer. With such irretrievable material loss, they constituted their memories into a home on the page. In this new place their fathers suffered displacement, irrelevance, and disempowerment from loss of status and usefulness. Men’s roles are not clearly defined, their authority undermined by unfamiliar customs and rules. For women, caretaking, whether of children or their parents, continues wherever they are.

It was a good decision to bring these stories in English to Australia, their second home. They were all touched on first encountering the history of dispossession of the Indigenous peoples. Their translations were edited by Loubna Haikal and Oula Ghannoum, and polished by Kathy Raheb. A magnum opus of its own as nuance and cultural significance of each writer’s emotional expression had to be preserved. This substantial process and its product, the anthology, display a wealth of skill and literary talent among these women who expanded their lives and minds with the best this country offers.

The title of this collection is from a line in Passport by Mahmoud Darwish in which, unwilling to travel or leave home, he asks that his passport be removed. The tree drawn by poet and artist, Etel Adnan on the cover evokes movement and ancestral strength even hosting a bird or two.

Writing is mind-changing. Fernando Pessoa says, 'I bear the wounds of all the battles I avoided.' None of these writers shies away from the battles that got them to this place of self-knowledge. There are no raw wounds, rather scars from which, with alchemy, the best expressions take shape. This is distilled writing that alludes to far more than first meets the eye. It is an important collection from a diverse group of similar origin and experience. They describe their sadness, their loss that sits askance in this society that can be slow to hear new voices. I enjoy re-reading these pieces as more treasures are revealed each time.

Mariam Matooq, Loubna Haikal, Mary Hanoun-Killa, Sivine Tabbouch, Hend Saab, Kilda Eid, Camilia Naim, Oula Ghannoum, and Nouha El-Khoury Francis, thank you. Take a bow.

Honouring a proud Lebanese Australian - Shafik Torbey Park, Winslow Street Darra, Brisbane

Violet Torbey

Before the unveiling. From the left: Joe Torbey (Shafik's brother), Shafik's seven children (from left to right), Kevin, Anthony, Michael, Christine, Glen, Violet and Peter, and Councillor Matthew Bourke, Jamboree Ward, Brisbane

Shafik Torbey, 1925-2018, was born in Lebanon and migrated to Australia in April 1951. He died in Brisbane at the age of 93. He spent most of his life in Darra from 1959 until his death in 2018. In 2019, the local councillor approached the family to name this small park in Darra after Shafik, to recognise the contributions he made to the local community. The park naming ceremony was held at 10am on Saturday, 1 February, 2020, at Shafik Torbey Park (56 Winslow Street, Darra). On the day, about 130 people turned up: about one third family, one third local Lebanese, and one third other local residents. It was a great day in that it was a joyous occasion with everyone in good spirits. A history board with details of Shafik's contribution to the community was erected on Friday 22 October 2021. The text of the history board is below.

Shafik Torbey was born in Lebanon in 1925 before migrating to Australia in 1952.

He moved to Darra in 1959 where he lived for almost 60 years. He ran a drapery store in Railway Parade until 1977 when he built a small strip of shops, still evident today at the corner of Railway Parade and Scotts Road on the old Glen Theatre site. From there he ran a menswear store until 1983.

Mr Torbey was a member of the Cementco Bowls Club for over 59 years, becoming a life member in 1995. He was instrumental in the running of the club, serving on the committee as president and treasurer, and also as patron for 38 years.

Mr Torbey was also a member of the Darra Progress Association, the Darra branch of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Darra - Jindalee Catholic Parish Finance Committee and the Brisbane Migrant Resource Centre. During his 50 years of service to the St Vincent de Paul Society, Mr Torbey would regularly attend homes and the local caravan park to assist those in need.

Anthony Torbey, Honorary Consul for Lebanon in Qld, & his wife Hana, Darra, Brisbane, 2020

Mr Torbey was appointed as the first president of the Lebanese Australian Association in Queensland. In 1988 he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for his service to the Lebanese community in Australia.

In 2008 Shafik Torbey instigated an annual award at the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School in Darra. It is awarded to a final year student who has excelled in both schoolwork and service to the community.

This park was named "Shafik Torbey Park" to honour a proud Lebanese Australian who left a positive imprint on the suburb of Darra, as well as in people's hearts and he will be remembered for generations to come.

Water Stories: Remembering the Lebanese in NSW as floods impact their lives

Youssef Taouk

On Saturday 13 September, and part of the History Council of NSW's History Week, the ALHS NSW branch held an online presentation by ALHS member Anne Thacker. The theme for History Week was "Water Stories" and some of the questions that were posed by the Council included:

- What happens to communities when water is absent or when it is destructive?
- How do waterways connect, or disconnect, communities?

Anne Thacker addressed the above questions with devastating effect through her presentation which was titled, "Water Stories: Remembering the Lebanese in NSW as floods impact their lives". The presentation focused on the history and impact of floods on the north coast of NSW, particularly North Lismore and the Lebanese community there. Some of the points that were addressed included the "Big Flood of 1866", family histories such the story of Joseph Bracks who nearly drowned in the Manning River, and North Lismore Lebanese settlers – from the late 19th century until 2025 – and how they were impacted by major floods. The presentation concluded with the 2022 Lismore floods and the impact on North Lismore as no longer a viable suburb, and the "Living Lab Project" established in 2024 to protect the history of North Lismore.

Members who attended were impressed by the breadth and depth of the research for the presentation. This was evident by the number of questions and discussion points that were fielded at the end. The NSW branch would like to extend its heartfelt gratitude to Anne for such an insightful and well-informed presentation.