

Syms Covington's writing box - history, provenance, and significance

History and Provenance:

The brass bound portable timber writing box in the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society's collection is believed to have originally belonged to Syms Covington, an important figure in local history and former assistant to renowned naturalist Charles Darwin.

Born in about 1809 in Bedford, Bedfordshire, England, the youngest of Simon and Elizabeth Covington's fifteen children, Syms was the sixth generation to bear the name "Simon".

His mother passed away around 1820 and after his father's death in 1831, he headed for the southern seaport of Plymouth where he signed on as a fiddler and cabin boy for the *HMS Beagle's* second and most famous voyage. Also on board was Charles Darwin, a young university graduate descended from a long line of scientists. The vessel departed Plymouth Sound in December 1831. It was during this expedition that Darwin began making the observations that culminated in his ground-breaking theory of evolution that forever revolutionised our understanding of biology.

Two years after the ship sailed from England, Darwin moved to engage an assistant to help with his on-shore excursions. He wrote in May 1833 to his sister Catherine "The following business piece is to my Father: having a servant of my own would be a really great addition to my comfort...at present, the Captain has appointed one of the men always to be with me – but I do not think it just thus to take a seaman out of the ship..." Having already settled on Syms, he wrote "The man is willing to be my servant and all the expences [sic] would be under sixty pounds per annum. I have taught him to shoot and skin birds, so that in my main object he is very useful..."

In his new role, Syms took on a myriad of duties - collector, hunter, and taxidermist, as well as writing up much of his employer's research. In September 1833 Darwin wrote to his sister Caroline that "My servant (Covington by name and most invaluable I find him)...the other day nearly lost his life in a quicksand and my gun completely..." The following year, writing again to Catherine, he asked that she "Tell my Father also, how much obliged I am for the affectionate way he speaks about my having a servant. It has made a great difference in my comfort; there is a standing order, in the Ship, that no one, excepting in civilized ports, leaves the vessel by himself. By thus having a constant companion, I am rendered much more independent, in that most dependent of all lives, a life on board..." He continued in a rather less than positive manner "My servant is an odd sort of person; I do not very

much like him; but he is, perhaps from his very oddity, very well adapted to all my purposes.”

In addition to his work with Darwin, Syms also found time to keep his own personal journal of the voyage, recording written and pictorial accounts of the places and people he encountered in a small, bound notebook with a dirty-brown waterproof cloth cover. Some years after his death, his son, also named Syms, presented the volume to the Linnean Society of New South Wales. It now forms part of the Mitchell Library collection of the State Library of New South Wales.

After completing extensive surveys in South America, the *Beagle* returned via New Zealand, Sydney and Hobart Town to Falmouth, Cornwall, in October 1836. Although the journey was planned to last two years, it was almost five when she finally landed back in England. Over the course of the trip, Syms and Darwin had collected a variety of natural history specimens, including birds, plants, and fossils and while visiting Sydney in 1836, amassed an assortment of insects, almost a third of which were previously unknown to science. According to Darwin’s records, Syms “...shot and prepared nearly all the specimens I brought home...” while British Museum Natural Historian Kenneth G. V. Smith thought it “...entirely probable that some of the collections were made entirely by Syms Covington, especially towards the end of the voyage.”

After returning to England, Covington continued working for Darwin, spending a few months at Cambridge sorting the mostly unnamed and unmounted collection of specimens into some semblance of order before moving with his employer to London.

The *Beagle* voyage had had a monumental effect of Darwin’s view of natural history. From the observations made during the expedition, he began to develop a revolutionary theory about the origin of living beings quite contrary to the popular view of other naturalists of the time. He noticed similarities among species from across the globe, as well as variations based on specific locations. The exposure to this vast array of specimens raised important questions and led him to develop his theory of evolution and the process of natural selection – species either successfully adapted to meet the changing circumstances of their natural habitat, or, in the case of those that failed to evolve and reproduce, died out. These biological truths eventually culminated in the naturalist’s controversial and ground-breaking 1859 publication *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Going against the commonly held belief based on the biblical Book of Genesis that all living beings were created by God in seven days and had never altered thereafter, its impact was shocking, but nonetheless paved the way for the tremendous advances in biology made in modern times.

In January 1839, Darwin married his cousin Emma Wedgwood of the well-known pottery family, and although Covington had noted in 1836 that Port Jackson was a place where "...a stranger must take care with whom he associated as the place consists principally [sic] of convicts, or the most notorious characters of England - and a place I must say I was heartily glad to leave...", he decided just a few months after Darwin's nuptials to emigrate to Australia.

Armed with references and letters of introduction from his former employer, Syms landed in Sydney in 1840 and quickly secured a position as a clerk with the Australian Agricultural Company.

In August 1841, he married Eliza Twyford at Stroud in northern New South Wales and the couple took up residence at Sydney's Miller's Point. Twelve months later their oldest child, a son named Syms Berril was born. He was followed in 1844 by Charles Erasmus, named in honour of Syms' friend and former employer, Erasmus also being a Darwin family name held by Charles' brother and grandfather.

When Edwin Ernest was born in 1846 the family were still residents of Miller's Point but by the time Syms' first daughter Elizabeth Louisa was born in February 1848, the family had moved to Pambula. This, it has been suggested, was at the suggestion of former Royal Navy Captain John Lloyd, who had purchased land at South Pambula and built a grand residence named The Grange.

Syms settled quickly into life in the township and by 1848 was operating a general store, no doubt drawing on the experience gained while working for the Australian Agricultural Company. In 1852, he was granted a spirit license for "...a slab cottage containing two rooms, plastered, with a shingle roof, situated in Quondola Street in the town of Panbula..." and two years later was appointed the town's second postmaster, naming William Hibburd and Armstrong McCausland, both of Pambula, as sureties and being paid £20 a year for his duties.

Soon after his arrival in the area, Syms set about purchasing land in the township and surrounding district. These included two town allotments in Quondola Street bought in 1852. In 1855, his new house of stone and brick was completed and in October that year he found himself before the local court on the complaint of the builder who stated that he hadn't been paid the full amount to which he was entitled. Syms responded by bringing a counterclaim.

As well as housing he and his family, the new premises were also used for his general store and post office, and in 1855 he was granted a general publican's license for a hotel "...known by the sign of the Forest Oak..." The building continues

to stand in Pambula to the present day and is now (2019) home to a Thai restaurant appropriately named "Covington's".

Between 1850 and 1858, Syms and his wife had five more children, three sons and two daughters and after the Walker family moved from the district, Syms was appointed to the Pambula National School board of local patrons. He, together with fellow publican Peter O'Neill, were also chosen for the honour of laying the foundation stone of the new Pambula Courthouse in 1860.

Syms is known to have been a prolific letter writer and despite being separated by thousands of miles, carried on a regular correspondence with Darwin over an extensive time period. In 1849 when Darwin asked his former assistant if he could gather together a representative sample of local barnacles for a book he had planned, Covington took his oldest son to nearby Twofold Bay where they assembled an assortment of crustaceans, Syms Junior later recalling helping his father with the task.

When the carefully prepared package arrived in England, Darwin wrote that "I have received a vast number of collections from different places, but never one so rich from one locality." Among the group was a surf-barnacle which he noted "...is most curious. It is a new species of a genus of which only one specimen is known to exist in the world..." Darwin later received the Royal Medal for his "*Monograph on the sub-class Cirripedia*", and it was for this work on barnacles that Darwin finally came into his own as a biologist. Specimens attributable to Syms still remain in the collections of a number of national cultural institutions including the British Museum, the British Natural History Museum, the National Museum of Scotland, and the Mitchell Library of the State Library of NSW.

After being "...seriously attacked by a complaint similar to paralysis..." Syms' health continued to deteriorate and although his doctor hoped for a recovery, he died on 19 February 1861. The *Illawarra Mercury and Southern Coast Advertiser* reported "I regret having to announce the demise of Mr. Syms Covington, Post-master of Pambula, which took place at 3 o'clock on Monday morning last in consequence of the paralytic attack I mentioned a short time since. The deceased was universally respected by all who knew him, for his unobtrusive punctual and honest conduct, accompanied as it was by kindness of manner and willingness to oblige." Buried in the Pambula Cemetery, he was just 52 years of age. (Note: The details shown on Syms' grave at Pambula regarding his age at death are incorrect.)

Ownership of the writing box is based on oral accounts and family lore. From Syms, it apparently passed to his eldest son, Syms Junior and from him, his widow (and

Syms' Senior's daughter-in-law). She remarried and as Sarah Twyford gave the box to prominent Merimbula resident, Sid Ford.

The Ford family had originally resided in Bega where Sid was in partnership with William Easdown as bootmakers. In 1915 he married May Maunder of Merimbula whose mother and brother were, at the time, running the Merimbula Hotel. After dissolving his partnership with Easdown in 1920, Sid moved to Merimbula to take over the hotel as licensee in 1921, at the same time changing the name to the Lake View. He later took over a bakery business in Pambula and in 1929 had a new residence, *Mayfair*, erected in Merimbula's Main Street. The house has since been relocated to South Pambula.

Ford was very involved in community affairs first in Bega and then later in Merimbula and Pambula and as "...a man who had given such sterling service to the community...", it was in his honour that Ford Oval was so named.

Covington's writing box passed to his daughter Betty Langford who donated it to the Museum in 1998.

Context:

Known variously as a writing case, writing slope, lap desk or travelling desk, portable writing desks have been in existence in one form or another in various cultures for hundreds of years.

From medieval times through to the end of the Renaissance, most desks were portable simply because of the itinerant nature of kingships and administration under dukes or counts. However, with the changes in social and economic circumstances in Britain from the early Modern Period, it became increasingly important to have access to personal writing equipment. The era from the latter half of the 17th century and throughout the whole of the 18th was considered by many to be the golden age of writing and diary keeping. Penmanship reached a level of perfection not seen before or, indeed since. Letters in longhand, written on handmade paper with quill pens were being sent in ever increasing numbers from one side of the world to the other. Not surprisingly then, this period perhaps more than any other proved to be the catalyst for the development of furniture to accommodate this growing volume of writing.

The first writing boxes were descended from "Bible boxes". As the name suggests, these were cases, often made of wood, that were used to store and transport the family bible, then a very costly, handwritten document liable to be stolen. Many of these boxes featured angled tops with a lip, meant to serve as a portable lectern for the tabletop when a bible was being read.

During the 1600s, these Bible boxes started being repurposed as writing desks, holding the necessary implements including pens, ink and paper, the sloped surface now serving as a desktop for writing as well as reading. And as more and more people took up the art of writing, equipment continued to improve. During the second half of the 17th century, portable desks patterned after Bible boxes were developed but with more intricate construction, functional design, and practicality of use, giving us the first examples of purpose made writing boxes.

However, despite their growing popularity with merchants, members of the clergy, travelling professionals and others, these portable desks had one major drawback. The irregular, sloping lid was difficult to pack and wasted valuable space when it came time to travel. The answer came in about the 1780s with the flat, rectangular container cut on the diagonal. When the lid was opened and laid down flat, it gave a writing slope that, when closed, folded up into a neat box. This basic form of the writing box remained largely unchanged for the next two hundred years.

Once this configuration had been established, writing boxes became increasingly popular, their practicality and portability allowing them to be carried on land journeys, long sea voyages, military campaigns, and geographic and scientific expeditions. It was during this time that they also became fine pieces of craftsmanship, handmade by cabinetmakers, carpenters, and skilled artisans.

By the 1800s, most regular writers, both male and female, had their own portable writing desks, a personal possession that could be taken from room to room or on journeys away from the home. They opened out into a convenient slope - the correct angle considered very important for the development of good handwriting - the surface of which was usually covered in velvet, felt, or tooled leather. These boxes were also fitted with compartments in which to store the necessary writing accessories – penholders, quills, inkwells, stationary, letters, seals, sealing wax, sand, and blotting paper. Many also had secret compartments.

Traditional writing boxes came in all sizes and were made from an assortment of woods and other materials, with less expensive examples featuring timber veneered onto a pine base. Marquetry was popular and brass strapping and corners often featured as additional protection against damage in sometime rugged conditions. Like so many objects, their design reflected the changing fashions of the times, but the function remained the same.

The writing box survived throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, featuring increasingly on military expeditions, travels, libraries and in drawing rooms, people writing dispatches, contracts, letters, and postcards on their sloping surfaces.

Comparative examples:

Similar portable timber writing boxes are held in many public collections, such as other examples in the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society Inc., as well the National Museum of Australia, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Museums Victoria, the Western Australian Museum, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney Living Museums, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Queanbeyan Museum and the Moruya and District Historical Society. Many more exist in private collections. None, however, have the association with Syms Covington that this example in the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society collection does.

The particular significance of this Object:

Known variously as writing desks, writing boxes or slopes, these portable writing compendiums developed from containers made to hold bibles, and then later paper, pens, ink, and other related items during military campaigns. Portable writing desks became increasingly popular during the late 18th century as literacy and communication systems improved, evolving into a common and decorative utilitarian domestic item.

This writing box is noteworthy for its association with eminent local colonial figure Syms Covington, assistant to noted 19th century naturalist Charles Darwin during and after his important *Beagle* voyage. The research undertaken during this expedition, with which Covington was intimately involved, contributed greatly to Darwin's ground-breaking *Origin of the Species* publication.

Covington also played an integral role in the history and development of the local region after his 1846 arrival in Pambula, taking up land, establishing businesses including the Forest Oak Inn and a general store, and occupying important public positions such as postmaster, on the Bench of Magistrates and the Pambula National School Board.

The value of this writing box extends to its association with Syms' son, also Syms, who, as well as following his father as local postmaster, assisted with the collection of local natural history specimens for Charles Darwin; and was responsible for the donation of his father's highly significant journals to the Linnean Society. These now form an important part of the Mitchell Library collection of the State Library of NSW.

The writing box also has links with Sid Ford, local businessman and community worker, who was involved in, among other things, construction of Merimbula's Twyford Hall as well as contributing to a range of local sporting and community groups and organisations.

The Covington writing box has aesthetic value as a testimony to earlier practices when utilitarian household items were constructed and presented in a decorative and visually appealing manner. Despite some signs of age, the fine workmanship that went into production of the piece, including the joinery, brass reinforcing straps, corner edgings and internal compartments are apparent.

Typical of writing equipment of the day, this box is a good representative example of its era and type.

It provides a rare and valuable extant link with Syms Covington, both locally and beyond. Although a number of items and collections associated with him survive in metropolitan, international, and private collections, this is one of only a few so closely linked with the man belonging either to the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society or other local public collections.

The Covington writing box has outstanding interpretive value. It is a good example of writing equipment of its era; is a tangible reminder of the presence and role of Syms Covington in the district; and it illustrates the importance that the written word played in his life, both before and after his arrival in Colonial NSW. The fact that he maintained an ongoing relationship with Charles Darwin, frequently corresponding with his former employer and forwarding locally sourced natural history specimens only serves to strengthen this significance.

It also has the potential to link with and contribute to the interpretation of important themes and storylines such as communication; transport; settling, developing, and building the region; developing the settlements, villages and towns; migration, migrant groups and migration journeys; business and commercial development; housing and accommodation; and labour, working and employment.

Related places, items, collections:



The headstone on Syms Covington's grave in the Pambula cemetery.
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Pair of goblets belonging to Syms Covington.
From the collection of the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society Inc.
Image by Angi High for Museum of the South East, © South East Arts (NSW) Inc.



Hand mirror belonging to Syms Covington.

From the collection of the Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society Inc.

Image by Angi High for Museum of the South East, © South East Arts (NSW) Inc.



Portrait of Syms Covington.

Courtesy of a private collection. All rights reserved.



Pair of wooden shoes handcrafted from timber and whalebone by Syms Covington during the *Beagle* voyage.
Courtesy of a private collection. All rights reserved.



Syms Covington's paint box.
Courtesy of a private collection. All rights reserved.

Z.1931.76.10 – Specimen, scaly-throated earthcreeper, *Upucerthia dumetaria* collected from Coquimbo, Chile, 1835 - collection of the National Museum of Scotland.

MLMSS6182 – Holy bible, 1833 – 1870, Holy bible (Oxford University Press, 1833) owned by Syms Covington and annotated by him - collection of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

PXD 41 – 18 drawings (on 5 sheets) - various sizes - sepia wash and pencil. Drawings made on the Voyage of the Beagle, 1831-1836 by Syms Covington - collection of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

MLMSS 2009/Box 108/Items 5-6 - Syms Covington's journal, 27 Dec. 1831 - 17 Nov. 1836, and letter of reference from Charles Darwin, 29 May 1839 - collection of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

R 677 – File 1a: Hide of a small animal collected by Syms Covington, ca. 1831-1836 - collection of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW



HMS Beagle: The Midshipman's Berth, oil on canvas by Augustus Earle, C. 1836. The individual seated at the bottom right with the monkey is reputedly Syms Covington, described in the Beagle's books as "Fiddler and Boy to the Poop Cabin". Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum collections, Greenwich, London, England (BHC1118).

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