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CHAPTER 5

BABA SCHOMBERG'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF MUA, 1921-1935

NEIL SCHOMBERG

Schomberg, N. 2008 10 17: Baba Schomberg's photographs of Mua, 1921-1935. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series* 4(2): 207-233. Brisbane. ISSN 1440-4788.

This chapter contains a selection from over 500 photographs taken by my father, Revd Junius Wilfred Schomberg, while he was stationed at St Paul's Mission, Mua. They offer a fascinating pictorial history of the Mission from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s. My father took the photos with a Houghton camera, which he bought in 1911 and which used both film and glass-plate negatives. He developed his own negatives and printed his postcard-size pictures on Mua. □ *Mua, Torres Strait, St Paul's, Schomberg, mission.*

Neil Schomberg, c/- Queensland Museum PO Box 3300, South Brisbane Qld 4101; received 24 July 2006.

BRIEF NOTES ON BABA SCHOMBERG'S LIFE AND WORK

Junius Wilfred Schomberg was born on 13 January 1891 at West Tamworth, NSW, and was ordained an Anglican priest in Newcastle, NSW, on 21 December 1915. He first served in the Pillaga Scrub area of Gunnedah and Wee Waa, NSW.

My father was a deeply religious and spiritual man, who in November 1918, many decades before it became a widely-held view, preached about the 'special debt of obligation' Europeans owed to the Aboriginal people of Australia 'because we have taken from them, not only their land, but to a large extent their very existence, giving them in return a perverted form of civilisation which does not only threaten their existence, but takes away their own customs and laws of morality' (Schomberg & Schomberg, 1998: 5).

On 7 August 1918 he married my mother, Ruby Pearl Meadows, at West Tamworth. They lost their first child, a son, but a daughter, Dorothea, was born in 1920 at Wee Waa. My father was called to become a missionary priest and on 22 August 1921, the family arrived at St Paul's Mission, Mua, where my father was to replace Revd George Luscombe as the fourth superintendent of the mission and priest-in-charge of Poid and Badu. For nearly two months the two families shared the small, badly-built, leaky Mission house. Two more children, Lewis Paul and Neil Meinhart (myself), were born on Thursday Island. All three of us children spent our early years at St Paul's and made great friends there.

My special mates were John Levi, Simeon Namok, Tuan Ware and Sam Kris and in their company I must have explored most of the mission area. I have been back several times, most recently to celebrate the community's centenary in September 2004. Dorothea and I are the only children still living but there are 8 Schomberg grandchildren and 14 great grandchildren.¹

My father was universally known throughout Torres Strait as 'Baba (Father) Schomberg' and his wife, my mother, as 'Ama (Mother) Schomberg'. However, it was not easy for my father in the beginning. Given his duties, he was constantly at sea and, despite knowing almost everything about sailing, he was always seasick. Crossings between Thursday Island and Mua at the time could take anything from four hours to 27 hours, depending on the weather and the seas. Baba was strict but fair. In his early sermons he criticizes his parishioners for consulting a Muslim Malay on Thursday Island rather than himself when they were ill but and for not attending Sunday worship, even to give thanks for being healed, taking this as a sign that 'the love of God does not yet seem to be a very strong driving force in our lives'. Nothing was keeping them away except 'the love of ease and worldly comfort' and he contrasted his present uncomfortable circumstances and relative poverty with what they might be if he had not come to St Paul's. He was distressed that superstition and *puripuri* were still so powerful, that parents refused permission for their children to marry so that the number of illegitimate births outnumbered legitimate ones, that people often did not 'speak straight' but hid the real reasons for their actions, that school

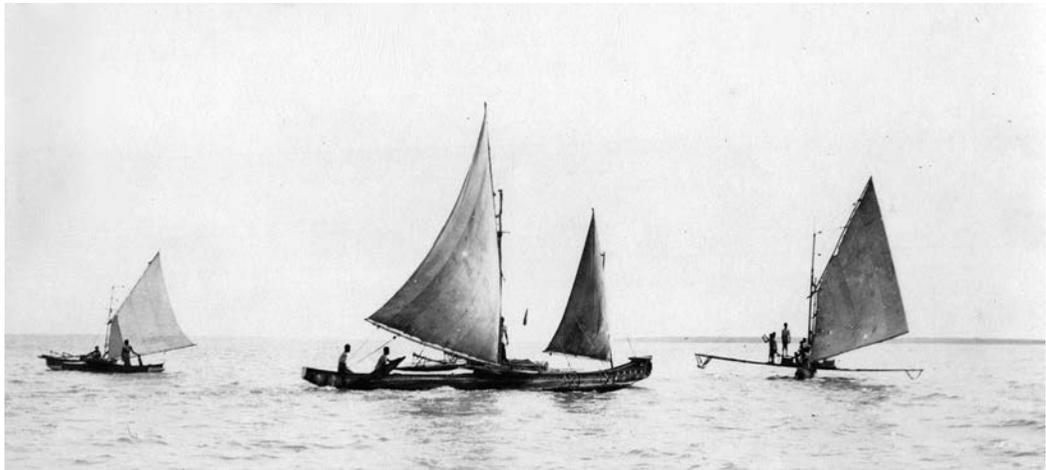


FIG. 1. New Guinea outrigger canoes on a visit to St Paul's, possibly mid-1920s. Some were single-masted, others had two masts with mainsail and a small jib-sail.

children lacked obedience to authority and that some villagers, 'wanting to please themselves and go their own way', caused periodic outbreaks of mistrust and unhappiness. He saw the missionary as one who strove to reconcile men to God and preached that 'all social life is based on faith in one another'. The greatest gift of the church, for him, lay in promoting a 'happy unity',

bringing 'people at war and variance with one another into a friendly family relationship as it has done in the Torres Straits.'

During his 14 years at St Paul's Mission, my father participated in and presided over its consolidation, gradually gaining the confidence, respect and love of the people. Six years after

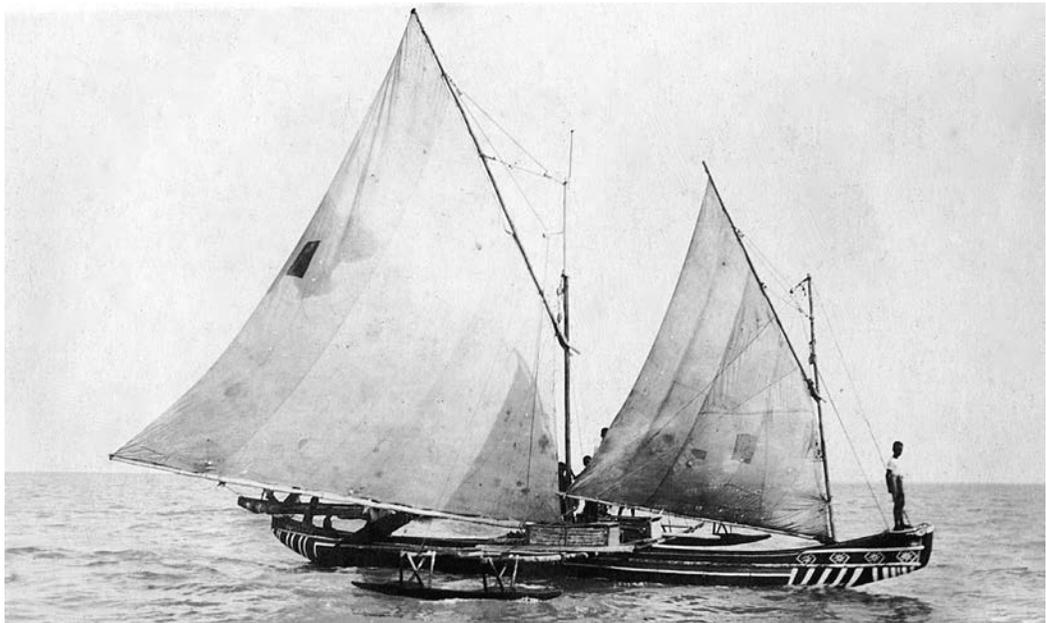


FIG. 2. Close-up view of the larger New Guinea canoe in Fig. 1, possibly mid-1920s, showing the outriggers of the main carved-out log of the centre boat. These logs come from around the Fly River area.



FIG. 3. The *Wakaid* at anchor in Thursday Island harbour, early 1930s.

his arrival, the Under-Secretary for Public Instruction praised his administration and called him 'a gentleman of outstanding ability.' A measure of the regard in which he was held by the community is that several boys were named for him, a great honour in Islander culture, and

the rock just north-east off Bulbul, which was his favourite place to fish, is still known as Baba Schomberg Rock.

My father worked long hours, from 6am to 11pm seven days a week, conducting services,



FIG. 4. Water had to be carried for the four-day scout camp at St Paul's, September 1928. Four kerosene tins of water are carried on poles.



FIG. 5. John Levi from St Paul's village with the eggs he has collected.

celebrating the Sacraments, writing sermons by the light of a kerosene lamp, supervising Sunday School, Mothers' Union and Heralds of the King meetings. He ministered not only to the spiritual needs of the community but also to their medical and justice needs, doctoring the sick and acting as adviser and secretary to the local court. He supervised the teaching and religious training of the Torres Strait Islander clergy at the Theological College, at the time the only such institution in Queensland for training Indigenous priests. It was under his instruction that the first Torres Strait Islander Church of England priests, Fathers Joseph Lui and Poey Passi, were ordained in 1925. Baba also found time to set up a company of Boy Scouts at St Paul's, later becoming District Scoutmaster in Torres Strait for about 500 scouts and guides. My father was engaged not only spiritually but also physically, sinking seven concrete wells in the village for clean water, supervising the construction of a new Mission House and later the Training College and Girls' Hostel and designing and planning two large and impressive churches. St Paul's Church at the Mission, originally built to seat 600 worshippers, was commenced at the end of 1925, its foundation stone laid on 18 July 1926 by the Archbishop of Brisbane, it was dedicated in the early 1940s and consecrated by Bishop Tony Hall-Matthews on St Paul's Day, 25 January 1995 – 70 years after commencement. St Mark's Church at Badu, built to accommodate 700, was commenced in late 1933 and completed at the end of 1935 and dedicated by Revd Stephen Davies, Bishop

of Carpentaria, on 12 January 1936. My father died just three weeks later of blood poisoning, never having held a service in the completed church.

You can see why Baba was too busy to keep a diary; instead he took photographs. He bought his Houghton camera at the age of 19 and became a keen amateur photographer. He was also an expert gardener – he made numerous references to gardens, garden food and gardening in his sermons and his trenched garden in the 'swamp', with its windmill for pumping water and its fruit and vegetables (tomatoes, lettuce, Chinese and English cabbage, kohlrabi, carrots, beetroot, green sprouts, cauliflower, cucumber, eggplants, watermelon, rockmelon and several varieties of beans) grown to perfection, was renowned throughout Queensland and even as far as Perth – there was said to be nothing like it north of Cairns. Baba collected butterflies, moths and beetles, which he donated to the Australian Museum in Sydney at the curator's request. He was a handyman and a skilled craftsman, working with tortoise, pearl and other shell. His beautifully-wrought gramophone cabinet of silky oak, with its speaker made from a large *bu* (conch) shell, was recently acquired by the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. He was in his youth a fine athlete and scholar, graduating as top of his class at St John's Theological College, Armidale, in 1914, knowledgeable in Latin, Hebrew and Greek but, at the same time, as Garnsey writes, 'happily free from pomposity [and] obtrusive piety'. Under the pen names of E. Mu and T. Tree, he wrote numerous articles for newspapers and magazines about Islander culture and religion, which he greatly respected, as well as Torres Strait flora and fauna, in order to supplement his meagre stipend of £250 (\$500) per year. After his death, his family's personal effects were valued at just over £66 (\$132).

My father died suddenly and unexpectedly of septicaemia in the Thursday Island hospital at 4am on 5 February 1936. He was buried at St Paul's Community, Mua, in the Northern Lady Chapel of the Church of England – which he designed – the only European to be so honoured: 'in the two chapels in the Church are buried two devoted priests, Revd J. Schomberg, on one side and the Rev. Joseph Lui, on the other', wrote Thomas Lowah of St Paul's, whose own wedding ceremony Baba conducted a few weeks before his death. A stained-glass memorial window was added to the side chapel in 1950 and a photograph of my father, taken on Thursday Island a month before his death, still hangs in the church.

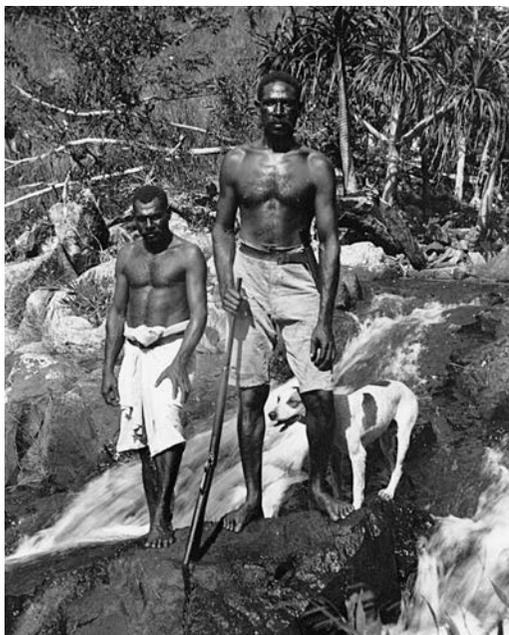


FIG. 6. Theological students, Sailor Gabey on left and Captain Oth on right, St Paul's Mission, c. 1920.



FIG. 7. Boys spear-fishing at St Paul's Mission, one standing on a log.

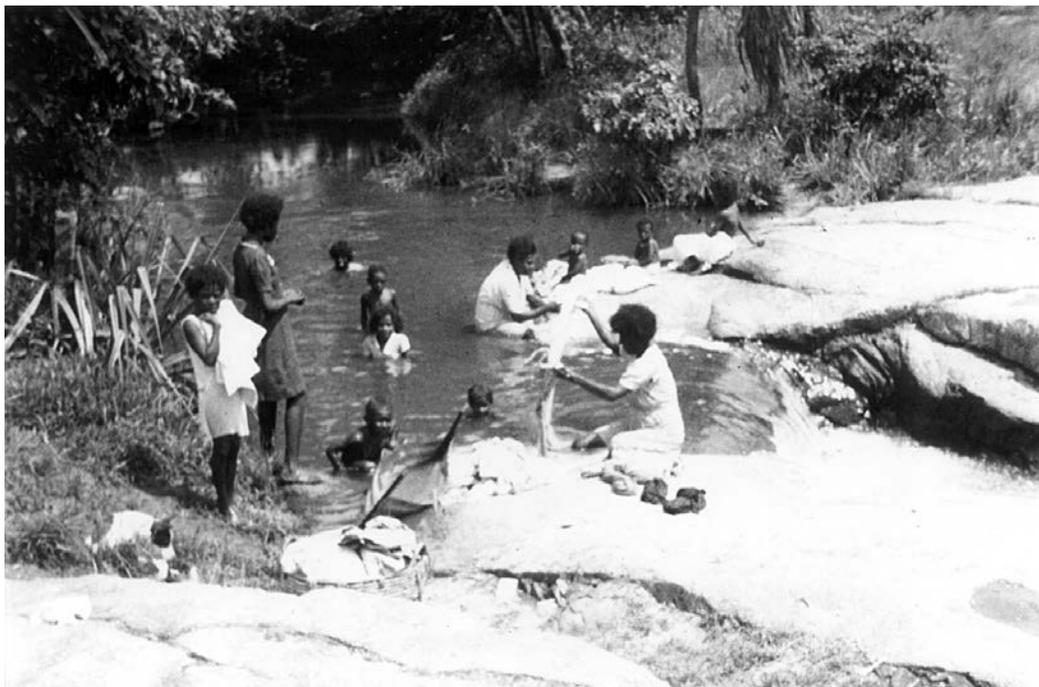


FIG. 8. Children swimming at St Paul's, while the parents do the washing, early 1950s. Photo: Neil Schomberg



FIG. 9. Wedding dancers with painted faces and carrying sticks, St Paul's Mission, 1920s.



FIG. 10. Children playing the maypole, St Paul's Mission, 1932.



FIG. 11. Men preparing meat for the *kapmauri*, St Paul's Mission, early 1920s. On the left is one of the coconut leaf baskets in which the food is placed for cooking.



FIG. 12. The food has been placed in the *kapmauri* in preparation for a feast, St Paul's Mission, early 1920s. Among the workers are Billy Abednego and George Lee.



FIG. 13. Feast at St Paul's Mission, around March 1923. Mrs Schomberg is holding Lewis on her left hip, Dorothea is held by Peter Savage on the right.



FIG. 14. Feast in preparation, St Paul's Mission, 1924. The women are using kerosene tins to boil the food and making dough for damper. Mary Bann is second from left; Charlie Namok's house in the distance.

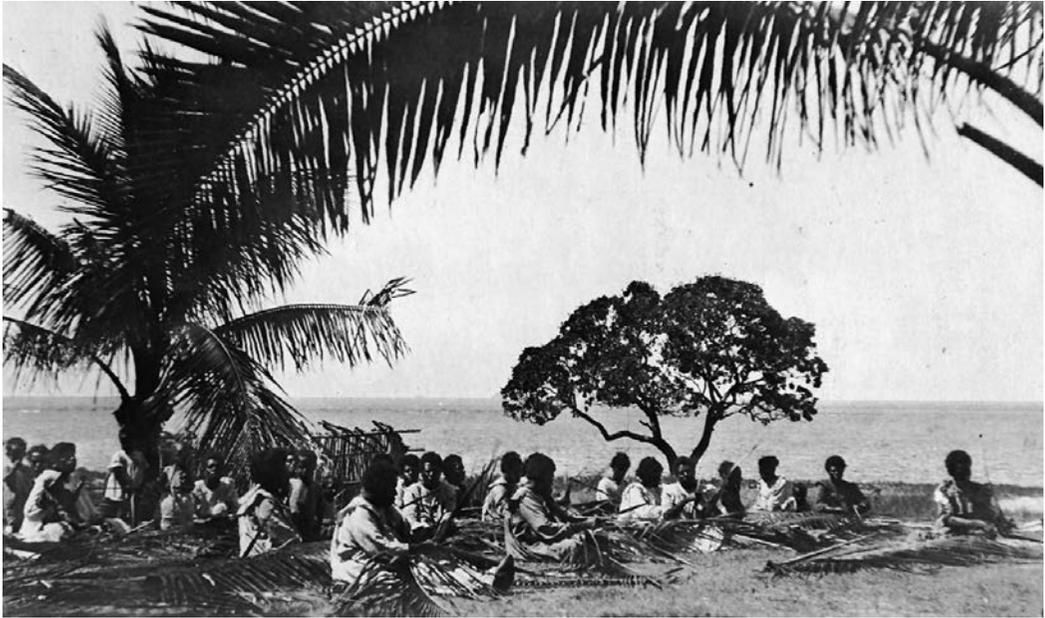


FIG. 15. Women from St Paul's Mission making coconut leaf mats, mid-1920s.



FIG. 16. Low swampy area among the ti-trees, the catchment area for the monsoon rain. In around 1923 Revd Schomberg began to create his celebrated swamp garden at St Paul's Mission. He cleared the area of scrub and small trees and dug deep, wide trenches. The excavated soil of rotted leaf matter was heaped between the connecting trenches and here he planted his fruits and vegetables, including bananas, pineapples, wongbok, tomatoes, pawpaws, etc. The water trenches lasted just until the next monsoon season. The garden supplied all the mission's needs and the surplus was sold in Thursday Island to raise money for the mission.



FIG. 17. Some of the large ti-trees were not dug out to create the swamp garden at St Paul's Mission. Here are young pineapples, tomato bushes and bananas. The timber frame at left was to support the granadilla vines.



FIG. 18. Lewis and Dorothea Schomberg and friends in front of a typical grass-house, St Paul's Mission, 1924.



FIG. 19. Constructing a grass house at St Paul's Mission was always a community effort. The stumps were generally bloodwood. The wall and roof framing was built of good straight mangrove. Here the frame is finished and the grass starting to be laid on the rafters. The grass was held on by strips of bamboo tied on with wire.



FIG. 20. The roof of the grass house is now finished and the walls started. Some long lengths of mangrove wood are being hauled along on two sulkies wheels.



FIG. 21. Thirteen men are working to finish the house roof off; only the grass remains to be tied down. The walls are finished, all neatly strapped. There is a long bamboo stalk on the roof.



FIG. 22. A finished grass house, St Paul's Mission. The tall man in the centre is Revd Joseph Lui.

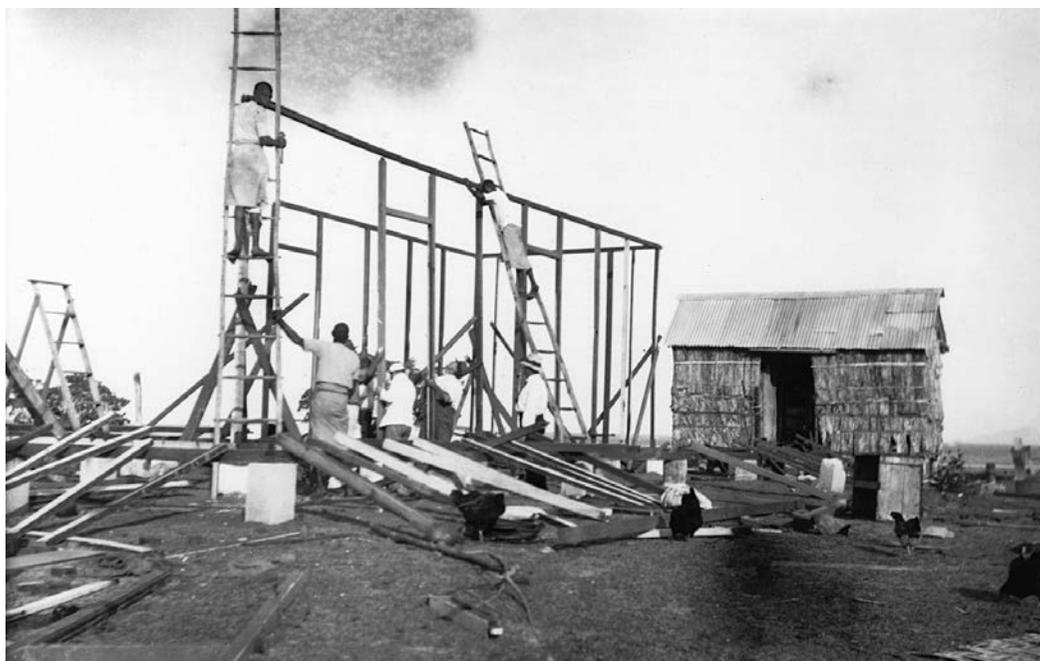


FIG. 23. The frame of the new mission house is being erected, St Paul's Mission, 1923. Revd Schomberg (wearing hat) is supervising the work. One of the old grass or bark-clad sheds, used before Revd Schomberg's arrival in August 1921, is still standing.



FIG. 24. The previous mission house was burned down, the wooden stumps pulled out and concrete stumps poured, St Paul's Mission, 1923.



FIG. 25. The mission house, St Paul's Mission, Christmas 1932. Lewis, Neil and Dorothea Schomberg in the garden.



FIG. 26. Unloading goods on the beach at St Paul's from the mission cutter *Banzai*, which is being held off the beach because of the rough seas. Goods are being passed hand to hand to the beach.



FIG. 27. Window frames for the new church at St Paul's Mission being carried up by the men to the building site, accompanied by dancing by the women, 1927. Mission house on left.



FIG. 28. The door and window frames are being carried up to the building site for the new church, St Paul's Mission, 1927. This was always an occasion to celebrate with dance. The mission house is on the left, the school is obscured, the old gaol is in the centre and the fibro church is rear right.



Fig. 29. Beginning to erect the new concrete church, St Paul's Mission, 1926. Mission house on left, students' college behind the bell-tower, school and old church on right.



Fig. 30. Building the new theological training college, St Paul's Mission, 1930. Side view showing how the old college was cut in half, so that the new building would not be too far away from the mission house. Windbreak fence on left.



FIG. 31. Mrs Lizzie Nawia (née Savage) and Neil Schomberg, Kubin, October 2001.

REVD J.W. SCHOMBERG:
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EDITORS NOTE

Neil Schomberg deposited the J.W. Schomberg and Neil Schomberg collection negatives in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. Copies of many images are also held by the Queensland Museum, State Library of Queensland and the St Paul's Community, Maa Island.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Neil Meinhart Schomberg was born 27 April 1929 on Thursday Island and passed away 30 April 2006 at Southport, Queensland. His ashes were scattered in the waters of St Paul's in October 2006. He is survived by his three children and seven grandchildren.

