

## 11. Old Admiralty House



Old Admiralty House has social and architectural significance to Darwin. The house was originally built in November 1937 on Lots 655 and 656 (corner of Peel Street and the Esplanade), which had been vacant and in absentee English hands until it was resumed by the Commonwealth that year. From that time, it was the residence for the District Naval Officer<sup>1</sup>. In September 1951 the house was moved from its original position to the present one on the corner of Knuckey Street and the Esplanade.

Between 1931 and 1951<sup>2</sup>, the site was occupied by Florenz August Karl Bleeser<sup>3</sup>, a postal official and botanist of increasing renown. Bleeser purchased land from absentee English owners and erected his home on Lot 651, established a small museum on Lot 650, also purchased from an absentee owner<sup>4</sup>, and designed and planted a garden with unusual trees, palms and orchids in a shade house.

<sup>1</sup> As opposed to the Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia (NOCNA) who lived in the Anglican Rectory during the war.

<sup>2</sup> See generally Welke and Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, 1993; 163-65.

<sup>3</sup> Often referred to in government documents as FAC Bleeser.

<sup>4</sup> The block was in the estate of Jacob Bauer who drowned at Escape Cliffs in October 1866. The property was transferred to his widow in 1887 and she sold to absentees from Adelaide. An 1887 report notes that Malays were living in a bark and iron hut on the block at the time.

Evacuated by road from Darwin after the raids of 19 February 1942, Bleeser died in Adelaide in November of the same year and the family did not return. Bleeser's garden still existed when Old Admiralty House was moved to the site in 1951. Some of the original trees in the garden remain today. Admiralty House continued as the home of the most senior naval officer in the north until 1983.

The house suffered minor damage during Cyclone Tracy and, in addition to being the residence for the Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia, became Naval Headquarters for the clean-up program to follow. It was used as an art gallery and coffee shop until early 1993. For a time from 1996, it was the premises of The Darwin Club.

Designed by the Works and Services Branch of the Department of the Interior in Canberra and with details added by Beni Burnett in Darwin<sup>5</sup>, this Type B was the grandest of a series of tropical designs attributed to Burnett.

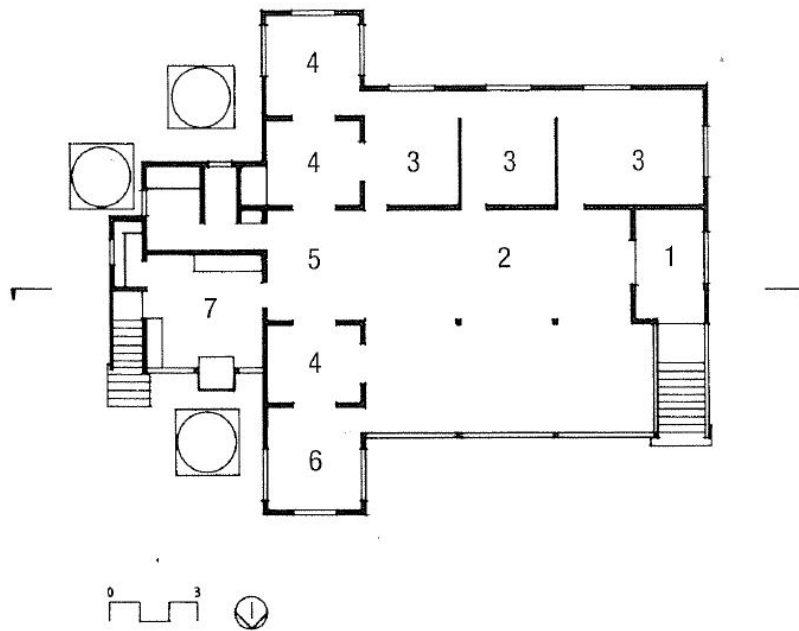
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<sup>5</sup> Bridgman, *Acclimatisation [architecture at the top end of Australia]*, 2003; p 57

# History

This house was constructed in 1937 immediately following the cyclone of 10 March that caused extensive damage in the city. Architect David Bridgman noted that the building is:

...remarkable for the manipulation of its interior space, the complexity of form and the asymmetrical disposition of the façade. ... The complex roof forms, the expressed timber frame structural system and the treatment of the façade with its stress on vertical and horizontal elements all find parallels in the vernacular and colonial architecture of tropical South-East Asia.<sup>6</sup>



*Floor plan of Old Admiralty House: 1 – porch; 2 – verandah; 3 – sleeping area; 4 – dressing rooms; 5 – lobby; 6 – mosquito-proof room; 7 – kitchen. (Bridgman, 2003; 56).*

In addition to the similarity to colonial housing in South-East Asia:

The lush tropical landscape almost completely obscures the bungalow providing shade to the walls while at the same time reflecting the romantic ideal of what a 'tropical house' should be like.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to the block being subdivided, the garden was also of significance, designed and nurtured by the internationally recognised amateur scientist and botanist (and long-time Darwin resident), Florenz Bleaser. Prior to its subdivision, the property was described as:

...characterised by a number of mature trees forming a canopy at roof level of the two-storey residence, a tennis court, and two separate gravelled driveways.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Bridgman, *Acclimatisation [architecture at the top end of Australia]*, 2003; p 57

<sup>7</sup> Bridgman, *Acclimatisation [architecture at the top end of Australia]*, 2003; p 56

<sup>8</sup> Old Admiralty House *Conservation and Management Plan*, Jackman Gooden Architects, 1994; 9

Bleeser, an employee of the Post and Telegraphic Office, was fluent in German, French English and Larrakia. His botanic pursuits resulted in a eucalypt, an orchid, a native grass and other species named after him. The Berlin Museum is home to the Bleeser Collection.

Florenz Bleeser was assiduous in his collection and nurturing of specimens and bushcraft, particularly where his family was concerned. His daughter Francesca recalled:

My father...said to my mother and me: 'Now dears, wander around as much as you like, and then sit down under a shady tree, and I'll find you'...I never bothered about where I was.<sup>9</sup>

Bleeser invested heavily in land in the Northern Territory—not for commercial return, but as a series of sanctuaries for plant and animal life. At the time of his death in 1942, he held over 3355 acres of primarily vacant land<sup>10</sup>:

Hundred	Land	Land Use
Bagot	Sections 97, 98, 99, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 384, 389 and 390.	All vacant land.
Town of Darwin	Sections 575, 670, 765, 799, 805, 822, 845, 872, 883, 884, 924, 992, 993 and 994.	All vacant land.
Town of Darwin	Section 649 [retail business in Smith St owned by his wife]	Dwelling in course of construction and double garage thereon.
Town of Darwin	Section 650	Dwelling thereon.
Town of Darwin	Section 651	Dwelling and outbuildings thereon.
Bagot	Sections 121 and 268, each 320 acres.	Vacant land.
Cavenagh	Sections 618, 619, 835, 836, 868, 869 and 927 (total 1593 acres).	Vacant land.
Colton	Section 275 (total 320 acres).	Vacant land.
Goyder	Section 962 (total 162 acres).	Vacant land.
Guy	Section 573 (total 320 acres).	Vacant land.
Strangways	Section 447 (total 320 acres).	Vacant land.

The first five parcels on the list above were retrospectively compulsorily acquired [they were taken over by the military following the first bombing raid on Darwin] by the Commonwealth on 17 January 1946 in the amount of £7290, an amount Francesca believed was well below their market value and which left her father significantly out of pocket<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Francesca Foster Oral History, Northern Territory Archives NTRS 226 TS694; page 4, Tape 1.

<sup>10</sup> Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 3623/P1.

<sup>11</sup> Francesca Foster Oral History, Northern Territory Archives NTRS 226 TS694; page 4, Tape 1; and Northern Territory Archives, NTRS 3623/P1.

Bleeser Street in Fannie Bay and Bleesers Creek at East Arm are named after him:

Named after Florenz Augustus [sic] Karl Bleeser who was Assistant Postmaster in Darwin for many years. He was a botanist of repute who collected many tropical plants in Darwin. Mr & Mrs Bleeser had the section where the Naval Commander's residence stands on the Esplanade and Knuckey Street Corner. His wife, Annie Maud Bleeser, ran a shop (between Brown's Mart and where the Police Boys Club used to be) selling brass-ware, camphor wood boxes, etc. She used to coach Darwin children in tennis. She died in 1960.<sup>12</sup>

Commodore Eric Eugene Johnston (1933-99)—who was Administrator of the Northern Territory from 1981-1989—was the last Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia to occupy the house before its sale and range of reuses.

## Biography – Florenz (Flo) Bleeser

Extracted from the *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 1, pages 22-24:

BLEESER, FLORENZ (FLO) AUGUST KARL (1871-1942), acting postmaster and naturalist of Darwin, was born on 5 July 1871 at Woodside, South Australia, the youngest child of Florenz Bleeser, shoemaker, and his wife Christine, formerly von Waldeck.

Educated at the local government school, he finished the curriculum when eleven but remained to help the teacher with the younger pupils until he was twelve. He had beautiful handwriting and an insatiable appetite for scientific books, reading all he could on geology, botany and mammals.

His great-grandfather (one of Napoleon's bodyguards) fell out in Poland during the retreat from Moscow and became a German citizen when that part was taken over by Germany. It is reputed that his father at sixteen accompanied the botanist, Dr Richard M Schomburgk, on his explorations in British Guiana during 1940-44, pressing and storing the botanical collection. His skills and interests profoundly influenced his son's life.

On 1 September 1884 Bleeser entered the Post and Telegraph Department of South Australia (which also administered the Northern Territory) as a messenger-boy in the post office at Woodside, under the name of Florenz Charles August Bleeser, which appears on his service records and other documents relating to him. He always believed this to be his correct name.

With little prospect of advancement, Bleeser tendered his resignation in 1890 but, on 1 May of that year, he gladly accepted an offer from the department for promotion and transfer to Port Darwin as a junior operator on the transcontinental telegraph line. Here he began his life-long work as a naturalist, in his spare time. He made many journeys throughout the Top End of the Northern Territory, collecting botanical, marine and insect specimens. He studied the habits of the Aborigines, collected their artefacts and learned the language of the Larakia people. He spoke it so fluently that it was indistinguishable from theirs. Nemarluk, the Aborigine, gave him a message stick for safe passage through other tribal lands and Bleeser never travelled without it.

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<sup>12</sup> Northern Territory Place Names Register.

With his German-born father and his mother a native of Alsace-Lorraine, he grew up speaking English, German and French, and in Darwin learned Japanese and Chinese from his contact with ship mails, and Malay from the pearl fishermen.

On 29 July 1903, following a meeting on the voyage from Adelaide to Darwin, he married Annie Maude Bevilaqua, daughter of Franz Bevilaqua (mining manager at Norseman, Western Australia, and his wife Susan, nee Gower, at Port Darwin, with the Reverend Fred Greenwood, Wesleyan minister, officiating. Born on 25 January 1891 at Beachport, South Australia, where her father was shipping agent at the time, Annie died at her Malvern home on 1 September 1960 at the age of seventy-nine. At Darwin she had been involved with church work and coached young people of all denominations on the Methodist church tennis court on Saturday mornings. During World Wars I and II she worked hard for the Red Cross and was honoured with life membership for her services.

Bleeser was an operator at Port Darwin from 1896 to 1903, a telegraphist until 1908 and clerical assistant from 1910 to 1912. In 1916 he was promoted to clerk and Receiver of Public Moneys, travelling on post office inspection duty as far as Attack Creek, the southern limit of the Northern Territory postal district. Although he was acting post master at Darwin, he never sought promotion, as this would have interfered with his personal interests as a naturalist.

Bleeser kept the records and duplicate specimens of his botanical collection housed in zinc-lined boxes in a small cottage next to his waterfront home. He established a bush-house for his orchids and a garden filled with unusual fruit trees. He sent some of his first plant collections to the Kew Herbarium, England, and the National Herbarium, Melbourne, but receiving no response he submitted in the mid-1920s specimens to Dr L Diels (a leading authority on Australian eucalypts) of the Berlin Herbarium 'who expressed immediate interest and wrote personally to encourage further collection'.

He also sent plant specimens to William F Blakely at the National Herbarium, Sydney. In 1927 Blakely described *Eucalyptus bleeseri* (collected by Bleeser near Darwin in 1927) dedicating it to 'Mr F. A. K. Bleeser, Assistant Postmaster, Port Darwin, who, for upwards of 38 years has taken a keen interest in the flora and fauna of the Northern Territory'.

At the end of 1928 the National Herbarium, Melbourne, received 102 northern Australian plant specimens from Bleeser, including *Alectryon bleeseri*, Schwarz, and a grass, *Eriachne bleeseri*, Pilger. Other plants bearing his name are another grass, *Eragrostis bleeseri*, Pilger; a plam, *Ptychosperma bleeseri*, Baret, 'after Florenz A. K. Bleeser, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century botanical collector in the Darwin area'; and a rare green ribbon orchid, *Chilochista bleeseri*, described by Dr Diels in 1932.

He gave generously of his knowledge and assistance to visiting scientists who paid tribute to the help and hospitality received from the Bleesers. Among these were Dr HL Clark of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, who visited Darwin in 1929 and 1932 to study the echinoderms in Northern Australia, and also Charles Barrett, who wrote: 'He had been everywhere in the north, from the west coast to Arnhem Land; and to the Aru Islands in a lugger. He was familiar with the plants and animals... He knew the haunts and habits of Aboriginal tribes, having in his younger days made boat voyages around the coast and trips

overland through unexplored country'. Bleeser was known as 'Boss' Bleeser and also as the 'Butterfly Man' for his collection of butterflies.

In 1924 he lent £500 to his daughter Francesca who established, in her own name, a shop in Smith Street to sell oriental goods. In partnership with her mother (known in Darwin as Nance), Francesca managed the business, kept the books and made frequent buying trips to Singapore.

In 1930, when the position of clerk was abolished in the Darwin Post Office, Bleeser was retained as an overpaid postal clerk until he retired the following year.

Following the Japanese raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942, civilians were evacuated south—Annie left by car but Bleeser left in the back of a truck where he suffered much physical distress. The homes of the evacuees were looted (mainly, it is said, by the Provost Corps). Florenz Bleeser's herbarium and bush-house of growing orchids were destroyed, his valuable stamp collection rifled and the Aboriginal artefacts and message stick stolen. The loss of his lifetime's labour 'broke his heart'. He died at his home at 91 Cambridge Terrace, Malvern, South Australia, on 1 November 1942, at the age of seventy-one, from encephalitis and acute pneumonia, after suffering endocarditis for twenty years. He was cremated at West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide.

Few specimens now remain of this dedicated naturalist's work. CP Mountford wrote of him in May 1956: 'Although Bleeser was forced by circumstances to live the humdrum life of a civil servant when he would have made his greatest contribution in a science laboratory, he added, more than any other man, to the store of our knowledge of the natural history around Darwin.'

—Jean P Fielding

## Additional Photographs



*Undated – Florenz Bleeser in the bush around Darwin.  
Image: Northern Territory Archives Service NTRS 1854 P1.*



*1940s – Post and Telegraphic Office staff. Seated on chairs, Florenz Bleeser at left and the Post Master, Hurtle Bald (beard) beside him.  
Image: Northern Territory Archives Service.*





1940s – Florenz Bleeser's home on the site of Old Admiralty House (Lot 651) on the Esplanade.  
Image: Australian War Memorial.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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September 1944 – war damage to Bleeser's Museum (Lot 650).  
Image: Australian War Memorial.



*1956 – Admiralty House.  
Image: Gerrard Collection, Northern Territory Library.*



*Undated – Admiralty House on the Esplanade.  
Image: Peter Forest Collection.*



1970 – Captain [later Commodore] Eric Johnston.  
Image: Northern Territory Library Collection.



1974 – Admiralty House doubling as Naval Headquarters following Cyclone Tracy.  
Image: National Archives of Australia.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

NAVYM2464/08

*December 1974 – Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia, Captain EE Johnston at Admiralty House, which became the NT Headquarters of RAN following Cyclone Tracy.  
Image: Australian War Memorial.*



*August 1984 - Admiralty House.  
Image: Department of Environment and Energy, Australian Government.*



*2018 – Old Admiralty House from the Esplanade.  
Image: Heritage Branch Collection.*