

# ANDREW ALLEN'S CURIOUS CAMPBELLTOWN PODCAST WITH FRAN MUSICO RULLO ON

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**AA** Hello everyone, and welcome to our next episode of Curious Campbelltown. My very special guest this morning is Fran Musico Rullo. For those who have not heard of Fran, she is a teacher at St Pat's College for Girls in Campbelltown. Fran is more than the average teacher, she is totally dedicated and passionate about her students, and this has led to widespread love and respect from her students, fellow teachers, and the community. Fran has won various awards including education HQ's Unsung Teacher Hero Award. I am also proud to call her a close friend. So now that I have thoroughly embarrassed you Fran, welcome to Curious Campbelltown.

**FM** Thank you Andrew.

**AA** I might start with your name, which obviously suggests an Italian background. Tell me a little about your Italian heritage.

**FM** Indeed, it's very Italian. Both sides of my family are from a place in Italy called Calabria, which is in the south of Italy, and my family has a really interesting migration story to Australia. It's a little bit different to the post war migration, because most of my family came out before the war. What happened during the war affected my family greatly. So, my mother's side, who were in Australia from the 1920's (my grandmother was actually born in Australia), they were fishermen at Woolloomooloo and Ulladulla. During the war they had their trawler, which was called The Two Freddie's confiscated, because when Mussolini entered the war in June 1940, there were all these legal restrictions put on Italians. So, a lot of people don't realise that because of being at war with Australia and Britain etc. with Italians, one of the things they were not allowed to do, was to fish. So, the US Army Small Ships Division came in and requisitioned the fishing trawlers. They were converted into not quite troop ships, but they did transport some troops to New Guinea, but also a lot of logistics. Their nickname was the Rag Tag Fleet, and they did a lot of that. So, both my grandparents and great grandparents had trawlers, and they were both requisitioned during the war, so they lost their livelihood.

The other things of course were that even if you were Italian citizens of course, but even if you were naturalized and you were of Italian extraction, these things pertained to you. So that's one thing, but they were also not allowed to possess cameras, you were not allowed to possess of course firearms, you were not allowed to possess Italian language material in your homes. So, my grandmother would have police turning up at her door in Woolloomooloo and have the house ransacked because they were looking for contraband. Because it was a place where my great grandparents lived, in Woolloomooloo, lots of Italians who got off

the ship were given this address to go to them, and they would help them out and settle them. So that was like a very busy place, lots of people in and out and caused a bit of suspicion by the local police. The national archives are great. They have all these wonderful files of police watching the house and recording everyone who was coming in and out. Then my maternal grandfather, they were in Leeton in New South Wales, and he had come out as a 12-year-old. Again, in the national archives they had to register as 'aliens', and report to the police every week. These archive files are great because you see the records of them going through all the mail before it got to them. He was not allowed to have a driver's license during the war. So, they were just trying to live normal lives.

My dad's dad, this is where it gets, I suppose more interesting, and, also quite sad, in the sense in that he came out in 1938. He had married my grandmother early in the year and he left her. She had fallen pregnant with my father, so she was early in the stage of pregnancy, he comes to Australia and gets caught up because the war breaks out.

## 5 mins

Now because he had only been here a short time and he was farming out at Cabramatta, he had been in Queensland with his brothers, but he had come down to Cabramatta which was all farms in those days, and he was farming around Bonnyrigg. There are all these wonderful, extensive files on him. He didn't register as an 'alien', which they had to. He probably didn't know. When I read his transcripts, he said he didn't even know that the war had broken out kind of thing. Of course, he was arrested, and the reason for his arrest was that he had a wife and a son in Italy, so therefore he had ties. He had a firearm, he was a farmer, so of course he needed to protect himself from vermin, especially out there, it was very dense bush in those days. He was arrested and everything was left. The national archives files show, really clearly, they actually document his entire farm; how many acres of peas, how many acres of potatoes, and then of course he was sent, well, they jailed them, they took them to Long Bay and then moved them to various camps in Australia. So he went to Liverpool, Orange, he spent quite a bit of time in Hay, and then spent more than a year or so over in Loveday in South Australia.

Once Italy had sort of got out of, well, Mussolini's downfall had started, they sent them more out on what they called the CAC, Civilian Alien Corps and he went to work on some of the railways. But there he was sort of captive. Every internee had an opportunity to plead their case for release and he did try that, and the files are so extensive, there were so many letters because his sister was living in Cabramatta at the time, and you see all these letters coming in, "please release him, we've got a farm we're producing goods for the troops". They had contracts. They would not release him at all, even though from what I can gather from the files, he had no fascist affiliation. He simply wanted to work and provide for his family.

He eventually got released before the war ended, but it set him back many years, and what happened was, it took him until 1949 to be able to save up to bring out

my grandmother and my father. My father met his dad for the first time when he was ten years old! That's not an uncommon story of Italian migration of that period. There's big gaps of separation and I always wonder how my grandmother was able to survive in Italy, because she didn't know whether he was alive, or dead.

**AA** We're talking about not that long ago either. I'm just sitting here shaking my head the whole time you're telling me this. I didn't realise that happened.

**FM** It happened of course to Germans and Australians that happened to be close to the Japanese. The other factor, which is not related to my family, but at the same time, a lot of people don't realise that Australians captured lots of Italian troops in Northern Africa, and 18,000 Italian soldiers were brought out to Australia during World War II, to solve the manpower shortage. So, they were also put in POW camps which were alongside the civilian internee camps in places like Cowra. So that's another aspect of Italian migration which doesn't get much mention. It's all very focused on the post war.

That period is really, I suppose, it's one of the things why I'm so interested in history, it's because of my own family history and my determination to find things through research. All historians, have to be nosey people, they have to be busy bodies, they have to have that quest to find more. I started this, with knowing from my parents that, "oh yes, your grandfather was in camps during the war", and that is all we knew. It's going through national archives and wanting to find out more, that I have been able to find out all of this. It's probably over 25 years of research really. It's amazing what's been kept, because they were considered high security documents. My grandfather was probably not that interested in the politics, but he lost that whole period of his life. About 5,000 Italians were interned during World War Two. The community at the outbreak of the war was about 30,000, so it was quite a high percentage.

Those women that were left to look after families, were not given anything from the government. There was no income protection, there was no dole, there was nothing. I always think of these women that were out on these farms, in the back of Queensland or in Griffith, or where have you, and they were just left. It was a really hard period. The Italian community has not been one to talk about the past. A lot of migrant communities are just focusing on the future, because they came from such poverty. People think Italy is just all Trevi Fountain, but the south of Italy was really destitute after World War II, but even before that, there was not much opportunity, and so therefore it was the thing to go to America, Argentina, Canada or Australia kind of thing, to get away from it all.

**10 min**

**AA** I guess they don't want to talk about it because it's not pleasant to talk about. Let's change the topic. Did you always want to be a teacher?

**FM** Not really, to be truthful with you. I think it chose me in the end, in many ways. I knew I wanted to study history, archeology, I loved ancient history and modern history. My intention was to get into Sydney Uni to a BA, because that was where

I could do all those things. Then I thought I might go into some kind of career from there. In those days and we're talking close to 30 years ago, there wasn't as many heritage jobs as there are today. A young person going to do a history degree and go and work for a heritage organization, there are a lot of careers in archaeology now, which there wasn't as much when I was there. So, I went into that, and I went on and did Post Grad, because research seemed to be what I shone at, it is what I love doing. So, I did my Honors and then I went on to do Post Grad research, and then I started getting work from some of the Professors. They would be working on a project, and they would send me off, and I got little bits and pieces. Then they offered us tutoring positions. You know, in the university situation you have the lecturer and the tutor. I started doing that and I liked it. I really enjoyed it. When I look back, I was probably only about 23, and I think I didn't know anything. But I liked it, I liked being a sort of Devil's Advocate in terms of making kids think, they were young adults really, but making them think rather than just taking it in. So that gave me a bit of feelers. Then I sort of got a bit disillusioned with the university system, and I left that and ended up at St Pat's after that. So that's where that happened, and it's probably been the best decision for me, because the universities now in the term of humanities, they're cutting all history faculties now, so I would probably still be going from contract to contract. So that's what happened.

**AA** So it worked out well in the end.

**FM** The journey was different to most, but I got a lot more of experience with children, than if I had just gone for an education degree and come out of it. I've actually trained as an historian and then did my teaching, so I have come from a different angle than maybe some others.

**AA** I can relate to a lot of what you are saying, especially about wanting to do archaeology. Do you regret it, do you still think about it now, do you regret not going into archaeology? I do sometimes, myself.

## 15 mins

**FM** I studied it, and I was really interested in historical archaeology, which as you know is Australian archaeology. I did a little bit of it, and it's not like Indiana Jones. I suppose it's a job where you have to be able to travel constantly. It is not a 9 to 5 job. If you have a family, that's a difficult thing. I don't regret it, I'm still very interested in it, but I don't regret it as such, because it's a lot of computer-work now. I'm not one who can sit still too long.

**AA** You have a strong interest in nursing too. Am I right in saying that?

**FM** I just find the Women's narrative of that whole ANZAC tradition interesting, I don't have a nursing background myself, but I have just developed an interest in those women. I think because they often got left out, they didn't talk about them very much. Just doing the work with the girls in the history club, and our local nurses, I have developed an interest.

**AA** They were certainly the unsung heroes.

**FM** They were, and you think about how unprepared they would have been, for what they had to endure over there. I think one of the women that I am very interested in, is Sister Elizabeth Macrae from Minto, and Jeff McGill did a lot of work on her. I think she would have gone from a bush nurse to the western front and a clearing station, where you can't even possibly imagine what she would have seen. It would have been a blood bath, and they worked around the clock, there weren't enough of them. They didn't have enough materials, the whole story, you hear about the nurses that were ripping up their petticoats to make bandages. The thing is, you just can't contemplate the noise, the smell, you can't contemplate the soldiers in agony, the lack of morphine.

**AA** It was just a hopeless situation, where you know they're not going to pull through, and the situation is so desperate and hopeless.

Let's get on to the history club. Can you tell me a little bit about the club?

**FM** I suppose it started in 2014, in the sense of, I'm thinking next year, 2015, will be the Gallipoli Centenary and I remember going to my principal, and saying: "I think it's an important anniversary, and we should do something". I put a call out to the kids, and said: "who would like to join a little committee, called the Gallipoli Commemorative Committee?" I had a little band of warriors that came along. So, I suppose that started it off, but if we want to talk officially as The History Club, it was 2017, in the middle of all those ANZAC centenaries. The reason why it all happened was a couple of things. One is, we often get lots of invitations to things and competitions, and I remember my HSIE coordinator at the time said: "why don't you just get a group together and we'll have these kids to call on all the time?". I said: "that's a good idea". There were a couple of things, too. To raise the profile of history as well, as a subject. It goes in ebbs and flows in terms of senior subjects. Ancient history as a subject, is statewide, but is declining. Modern history holds its own but ancient history has been on the decline. It was just to get the kids passionate about history. So that's how it all came about. It sort-of just developed, there's no one clear-cut thing. That happened officially in 2017. It's a group, as an extracurricular activity, and we meet once a week at lunch time, and then sometimes we have other things after school or weekends. It's a group open to everybody in every year, and they come if they can get there, there's no drama. It's not meant to be an academic group, it's just a passion for those kids that are interested.

**AA** Can you tell me about the projects, or just one, that the girls were involved in?

**20 mins**

**FM** One of the early ones was the Centenary off the Armistice. You came to our big ceremony that we put together. The girls worked on that for a year. It had a lot of dimensions to it, the biggest thing was the ceremony that we had, which was about the students researching some of their own stories. The amount of poppies that we made that year! I remember one lunch time I put a call out, saying: "if you would like to make poppies that we are going to decorate the hall with, come",

and a hundred kids turned up, so it was very busy. That was an important part. One of the interesting dimensions of that was that the Australian War Memorial gave us these little wooden crosses. What they wanted the girls to write was a message, their name and the name of the school they came from. They were going to take them over to the Western Front to put on Australian graves. So, every kid in the school wrote a message, put their name, school name and then we sent them back to the Australian War Memorial, and I thought oh well, see what happens. Then we started getting emails from people who had gone to the Western Front, saw our little crosses that had been placed by the War Memorial on the gravestones of soldiers, and people started sending photos of them, at the Western Front. We received lovely emails from people from all over the world! It was very special.

**AA** The girls seem so involved with it, and they're passionate about it as well. Do they ever get times where they lack motivation, I guess?

**FM** We try to change things up constantly. Everybody has got their own little role. Some girls will be working on say, an ANZAC project, another one will be working on another competition. There is a group of girls that are making a Lego Titanic at the moment, and that's their thing that they do. I try to keep it open to lots of different sort of tasks. I do notice they love when they're working for a big competition. They seem to really like doing that. Even when I say: "let's have a break this year and do something different", they go "no, we want to do it". That sometimes comes from the seniors as well, so they do like having that purpose and direction with a project. I think there's a lot of competing groups and there's so much to do at St Pat's, so they might have to have a little sojourn from history club so they can do rock band, or something else. I find them all pretty keen.

**AA** A lot of the projects involve them talking about their ancestors, so I guess they can relate to what their ancestor went through. So, there's that connection now, I suppose.

**FM** Out of everything that I have done with them, to me, that's the most rewarding when a family just says, we knew nothing about our ancestry until you found that service record. So that's a very special thing when you can help a family find information that they didn't know existed.

**AA** I remember with William Lyttle King, have I got that name right?

**FM** Yes that's right.

**AA** And Mackenzie?

**FM** Yes, Mackenzie and Tess.

**AA** That was amazing, the connection she developed towards her ancestor.

**FM** Even of course, we had an ANZAC presentation the other day, with the more recent veterans that have come from Afghanistan, Iraq etc., one of those families said to me "you've brought our family together because we never had those conversations before", so it has lots of different ripples.

**AA** It must be so rewarding for you. Now, you have just won the National Award for the ANZAC Day Schools Award, can you tell me a little bit about that, and how that was, winning that?

**FM** It was really great, and the topic or theme of this year's awards was 'Our local veterans'. So that's really the kind of thing that we love doing, because last year we did ours on Campbelltown in the Vietnam War which you, here, at the library were involved with us, and we got to New South Wales state winner, and we had done that a couple of times before, but this was the time when we were able to become the national winner, and one of things I think, which we did this time, which we hadn't done before, was more student reflection.

## **25 mins**

So, more opportunities for the kids to reflect on what they had learnt, or how they felt about everything. So, it was great. We took the approach that we want to record and preserve the stories of our local veterans. The focus of all these projects, is not to just do a project and then forget about it, but the testimony that we are getting, is going to be valuable as part of your oral history collection, here, at the library, and it will be there for posterity. I mean, you, at the library, don't have the physical time or resources to interview fourteen people in a go, but having the girls do it, is really important. So, we started with World War I, because we didn't have anybody that I knew from the Boer War, or earlier, and we went right through until we got to somebody who is a current, serving member, and tried to collect some testimony. Some of the people that we interviewed were connected to the school in terms of parents, but some of them are from the local RSL Sub-Branch, who we formed a very strong relationship with, particularly with Campbelltown, but we worked with Ingleburn over the years, with lots of different things. So basically, we interviewed all the veterans or families of veterans, and the girls wrote up bios of them. Our entry was a website, that's how we submitted the entries, so they could see. Those that came to be interviewed, also got a beautiful portrait done, and we asked them to bring a photographic portrait, that is we asked them to bring an item from their service, and we had some really interesting things people brought in. So, we've got these lovely photographic portraits as well, which were done by one of our Year 10 students, and Aisha Aboud, one of my colleagues.

There's a lot of local history that's now recorded, and as you know, one of our veterans passed away only three weeks after our interviews, so how lucky are we that we got that testimony, and the family are very much appreciative that they have that now, because that was his last big outing. It just shows you how precious, and how we've got to, we really don't just say: "we've got to record it one day", we do it. It's valuable, you won't get that testimony ever. There's no document that's going to produce that level of source material.

**AA** I was amazed when you interviewed the Vietnam veterans, when they said that they had never really spoken about what they went through before. We're talking about 50 years after the event, but they have never really opened-up to anyone

about it. I found that incredible, and I was surprised by it too, because of the reaction they received when they got home.

**FM** That's right, exactly, and you will recall when we talked to them, how many of them got spat on when they got home. They had to arrive back in civvies rather than in uniform, because there was just too much antagonism on the streets. The fact that somebody, actually cares, that somebody wants to know what they went through, does a lot for them as well. Because no one has ever asked the questions before.

**AA** No, and they were keen to talk, were they? Was there any hesitancy?

**FM** No, we put the call out to the RSL Sub-Branches, and of course they obviously talked to their members and asked them who was comfortable. All the ones that came were quite open. Of course they weren't going to tell us everything, that's too hard, but they seemed to be good with the girls. The girls seemed to have that way with them.

**AA** Congratulations, it was a wonderful award and well deserved.

**FM** Thank you. The prize money will go into - we are getting some more costumes made and things that we need to look after them. We will go to a bit more World War II focus, as next year's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.

**AA** That was the next question that I was going to ask you. What have you got coming up?

**FM** Well, what we've got coming up for 2025, is not a military history but our college, the name St Patrick's is 185 years old. So, we are going to be focusing on that next year, trying to interview some ex-students and staff, and write up the history of that. That's a big year for us and a different focus.

**30 mins**

**AA** So you will be involved in the writing of that.

**FM** Yes, the archivist Jo Cavallin, and I, will be looking into it. The Campbelltown/Airds Historical Society are publishing a little publication. We got a grant from the Royal Australian Historical Society, so we will be able to produce, hopefully, a good little history to set the record straight. There's quite a lot of inaccuracies out there in some of the history books, so we want to get the story right, as much as we can.

**AA** You're the queen of displays. I've actually seen it, for myself, and I have heard about it, so have you always had that sort of flair?

**FM** Yes, I love art. I did a lot of art, I did three-unit art at high school, so I've always had that sort of flair to myself. We've got this space at school, which hadn't been used, and so the first display that we did was the ANZAC nurses of Campbelltown, those ladies you will remember when we did that. Then when the school turned 180, we decided to do a display on particular eras of the college, and that's still there so we will be able to just update it then for next year. Of



course, Covid put an end to all of our celebrations back then, in 2020, so hopefully this time we can celebrate with a bit more style. But the girls helped me put those together, and one of things that they wanted to do in those displays, was let the sources tell the story. Because they said: "if you put lots of writing there, Miss, no one is going to read it". But if it's very visual they will look at it, and I do watch them, and they do like looking at pictures of the old uniforms and the nuns, and all those-kind-of-things. Of course, the competitions we have won, have enabled us to buy - I have bought an actual antique slate, so the girls can see what they used to use in the classroom, or an old schoolgirl for example, and we've been able to put them in there. We don't have a lot of really, early material, that's authentically St Pat's, because nobody kept anything in those days very much. The nuns lived pretty spartan lives, I don't think there was a lot of money to throw around anyway.

**AA** I know you like history as you spoke about. I've got a question for you. Imagine you are at a dinner party, and you can have any four guests from history at your dinner party, who would they be?

**FM** Well, this is a big question. I think I am going to narrow it down to more local, particularly as I have been working a lot with the research of the school. There're a few people from history in Campbelltown area that I would like to have a chat with. I would love to have met Sister Elizabeth Macrae. I think I would have so many questions to ask her, because she never left any letters or any diaries, so we have only got circumstantial information about her. I would love to talk to her about being a nurse in World War One, but also Korea post, post that. So, she would have been interesting. I would have liked to have have at my dinner table - Patrick Newman, the famous schoolmaster at Campbelltown, because he worked at the original St Pat's school, and then of course when the whole Public Education Act came in, and there was no more money for that, he went and worked for Campbelltown Public School, and he is legendary, and I have lots of questions to ask him too. I would like him to just give me some photos of him. He would be an interesting person to speak to. Other local identities, I suppose the other nurse who interests me a lot is Nurse Haultain, who was from World War II, from Ingleburn, and she was killed aboard the Centaur, in 1943. So, I think her story would be interesting too.

**35 mins**

I suppose if I just step out of the local and to more of an Australian history, I would have liked to have had a little dinner chat with John Curtin, the wartime Prime Minister. He would have been an interesting person to talk to because he changed the course of the war, and he changed the course of Australia's direction in terms of foreign policy. A man who pretty much died as a result, his heart attack was probably induced by the stress of what he was going through. The first one to say to Churchill: "no, I'm not sending my troops, we need them here". If you think about the peril that Australians felt. There're always historical arguments saying that the Japanese had no actual plans to invade Australia, but they were sure damn good at bombing, and sending subs into Sydney Harbour, enough to

frighten every Australian. I think he would be interesting to talk to as well, at the dinner party. So that's who I would have.

**AA** That's an interesting lot of people. I know my daughter studied John Curtin in the HSC, in year 12, and I was pleased about that because he was such an important person in our country's history. That's an interesting lot of people. As the Local Studies Librarian for Campbelltown, I would love to speak to Fred Fisher. Sit him down and ask what really happened. Did you, or didn't you? Last question Fran, and it's another history themed sort of question. If you were to get in a time machine where, and when would you go back to?

**FM** I'm going to be very philosophical about this. My understanding of history is you don't really want to go back. If it's just for a couple of hours, then I will talk to you about where I might like to go, but in terms of the past, we are living in a society which has a nice, stable democracy at the moment. We have anesthetic, we have medical, we have running water in our homes, we have electricity. Those little things most people take for granted, but they are all more recent things in our history. So, in terms of going back, I don't think it would be nice to go back. I don't want to go to the trenches of World War One, I don't want to go back to Victorian Britain. I don't even want to go to the ancient Romans. As a woman too, it's taken so many centuries for women to get even some of the basic rights. We don't have to go back very far, it took until 1975 to bring in no-fault divorce or the fact that women didn't need their husbands to open a bank account for them. There's a lot of things. If I had a chance to go back just for a couple of hours, I don't want to go back too far, I would like to go and visit, because of the research of the history of the school, I would have loved to have gone and spent a couple of hours down at St Patrick's School, when it was at Quondong. Just to see what it was like, and probably in the 1870s, maybe 1880s, in Campbelltown, I would like to walk down Queen Street. I would like to see all the hills - green, did they still have the wheat then, or did the big virus come through?

**AA** Towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it started to finish up then, around the 1880s, I think, from memory.

**FM** I think it would be lovely to see what it was like. To see Pansy going up towards Camden. The beautiful buildings that were in Queen Street. I don't need to tell you this, because it is your great distress having written a book about all the demolished buildings of Campbelltown. Had our Council had the foresight in the 60s and the 70s, and the 80s, they were so hellbent on progress and modernizing Campbelltown, but had we just protected more of it. I mean Campbelltown had been a lovely little Windsor-like place. I'm not against progress, but we had some beautiful buildings in Campbelltown which were just all demolished. I would have liked to have gone and had a look over then. The only other probably snapshot, I would have loved to have seen the Beatles playing in concert. Probably the Sydney Stadium in 1964, I would have loved to see the Beatles play together. So that's where I would go back to.

**AA** I can relate to what you are saying. I would love to have walked up Queen Street, 100 years ago, and seen what the buildings were like.

**FM** Maybe with AI they could do a virtual reality for us one day, and we can have a little look into what it might have looked like perhaps. I'm sorry I'm not very excited about going back, but as I said, these basic things we take for granted. Even just dentistry. People look back at history and think everyone was like we are now but, when you think it was a smelly place - history, people would open their mouths, you died from abscesses. I think what history teaches you is to appreciate how much we have achieved in time. The old adage is history is about now and not about yesterday, so that's how I look at the past. It's nice to study but I don't want to go back to it. If you know your history, you won't have a romantic look at it. It's not nostalgia, who would want to go back to 1930s in Germany, and all those-kind-of things.

**AA** Thank you Fran.

**FM** Thank you.

**AA** Well done in all that you have achieved. You've done great things for education in the community so congratulations. I have loved talking to you today.

**FM** Thanks Andrew.