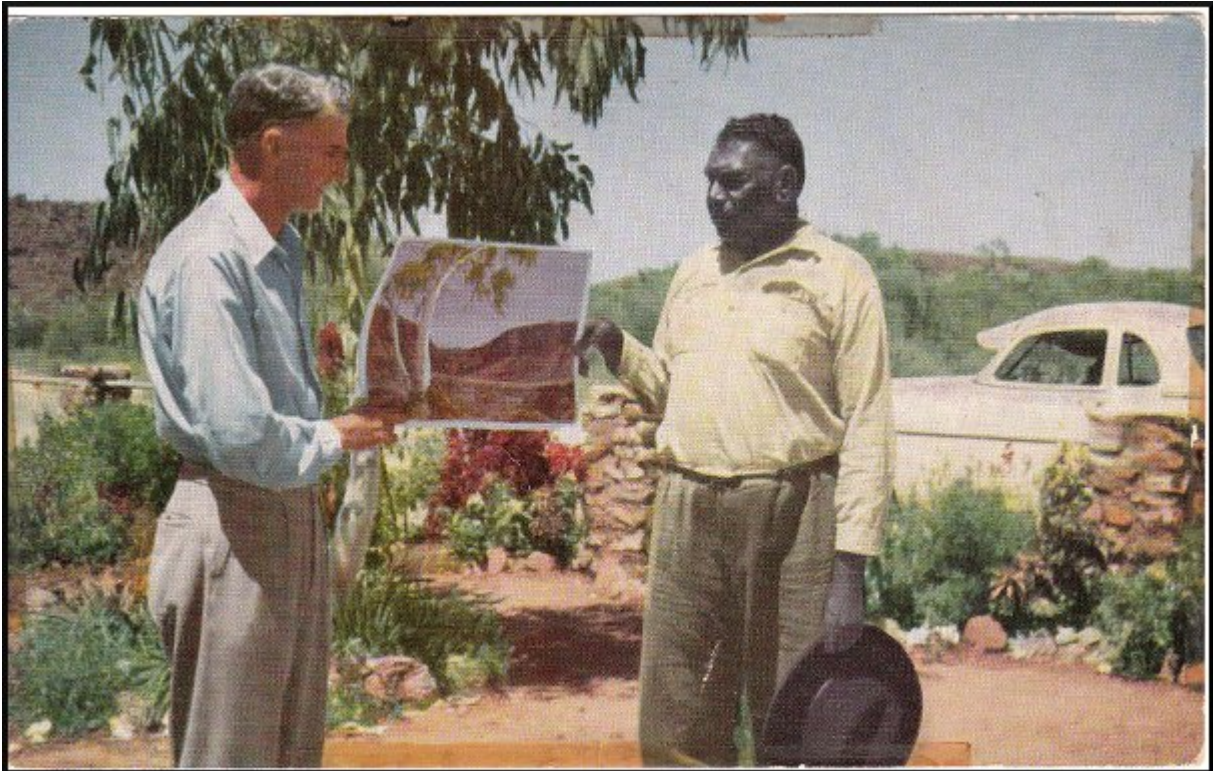

The Warrnambool man who taught Namatjira watercolours

Description



Rex Battarbee and Albert Namatjira circa 1950s, when Albert was at the height of his fame. Image courtesy Gayle Quarmby.

[box]WIN! Subscribers can go in the draw to win a copy of *Battarbee and Namatjira*, by Martin Edmond (Giramondo, 2014) by simply emailing us at editor@bluestonemagazine.com.au by Friday May 1. Prize supplied courtesy of Giramondo publishing. [/box]

By Carol Altmann

Just about everyone who grew up in the south-west in the 60s had at least one print by **Albert Namatjira** in their family home, but far less people are aware that the man who taught Albert watercolours was from Warrnambool.

Reginald Battarbee, known as Rex, is today far less famous than his pupil, but was an artist in his own right whose life journey would see him play a pivotal role in the emergence of Albert as an acclaimed artist.

While Albert Namatjira's story has been well documented, Rex Battarbee has remained relatively in the background – until recently.

New Zealand author **Martin Edmond** has combined the stories of both men in his biography, *Battarbee and Namatjira*, (Giramondo) released late last year to what have been strong reviews and an appreciation that their shared history has, at last, been recorded in detail.

Martin has drawn extensively upon Rex's personal diaries and other documents, many provided by Rex's daughter, **Gayle Quarmby**, to tell the story of a man who grew up as one of five children in Warrnambool – the son of a pig farmer – who would later spend years of his life in the outback.

Older Warrnamboolians will remember "Battarbee's corner" along the old highway in east Warrnambool, named for the nearby Battarbee farm, *Skiddaw*: there is now a Skiddaw Cr in this same area.



An earlier shot of Albert Namatjira with his paintings, circa 1940. Image courtesy Gayle Quarmby.

Rex began his working life there, helping his father with his ham and bacon curing business, until the outbreak of World War 1.

Rex joined the many thousands of young men from south-west Victoria who enlisted and, in so doing, stepped onto a path that would lead to a very different future.

Martin recounts the extraordinary series of events that began on 12 May 1917 when Rex was peppered with machine gun fire at Bullecourt and was so badly injured that he was left for dead.

It was only two days later that he was found under a pile of bodies, still breathing, and rescued by two stretcher bearers.

Unbelievably, the stretcher bearers also came under fire and were killed while transporting Rex to safety, requiring him to be rescued a *second* time.



Wounded: Rex Battarbee circa 1920s after he returned from the battlefields of World War 1 with his life-changing injuries. Image courtesy Gayle Quarmby.

It is an horrific, *Sliding Doors* moment that accompanies any near death experience and raises the question that if Rex had not survived, would Albert Namitjira have ever come to prominence many years later?

Martin describes the injuries that would change Rex's life irrevocably: "His left hand was smashed; his right elbow and shoulder too; he took bullets in the chest as well. One of those pieces of shot, a round ball of lead, emerged years later from his armpit on the opposite side of the body upon which it entered; another token was a 1914 Australian penny with a dent in it where a bullet had glanced off."

While maimed for life, Rex's injuries shaped what appeared to be his destiny: he could no longer farm so, inspired by his artistic sister, he enrolled to study commercial art in Melbourne.



Rex Battarbee discusses a work with Albert Namatjira, circa 1950s. Image courtesy Gayle Quarmby.

How Rex and Albert's lives came to intersect was another product of Rex's adventurous spirit and bold, never-look-back approach to life.

By the late 1920s, he and fellow art school student **John Gardner** had taken to making long journeys into remote areas to spend time painting.

The ultimate remote area was central Australia which, at that time, was as foreign to most white Australians as Mars, having never seen even colour photos of the outback, let alone visited there.

Rex and John began to visit Alice Springs in the 1930s and, in 1934, held an exhibition at the Hermmansburg Mission. Unlike other exhibitions at the mission this one, for the first time, was open to both white and indigenous people to see.



Rex Battarbee and Albert Namatjira with Albert's early works circa 1938.
Image courtesy Gayle Quarmby.

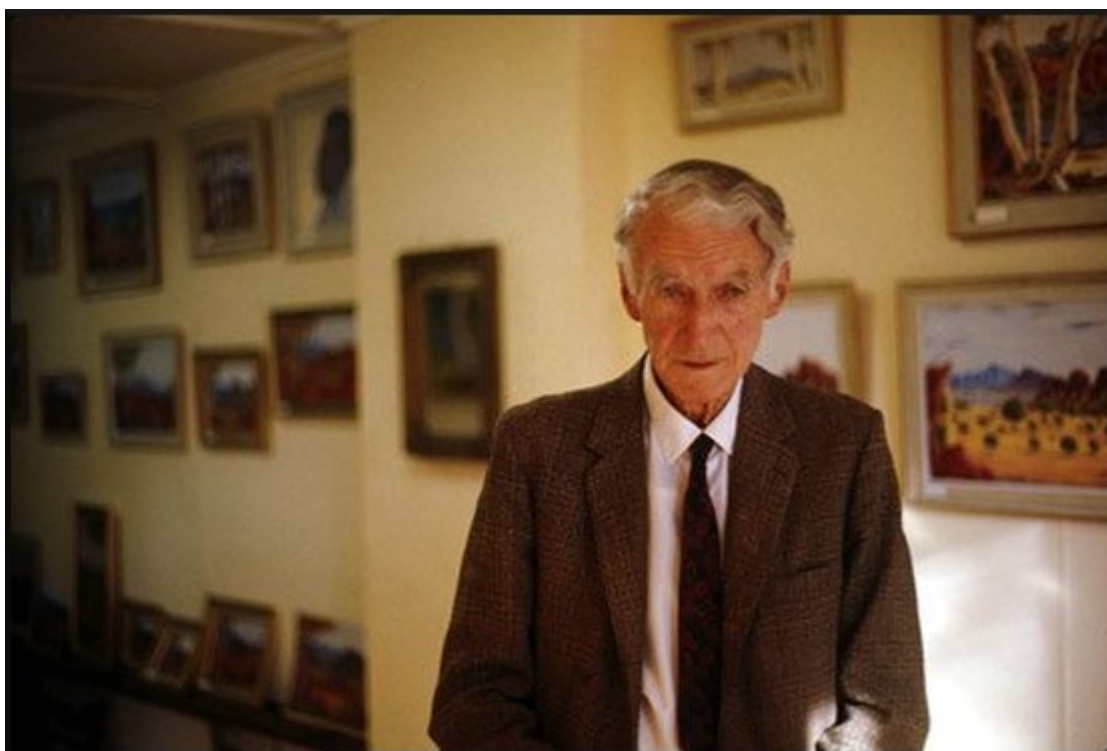
Martin writes that the indigenous people were captivated by the watercolour paintings of their country, having never before seen it captured as if looking at a screen, compared to the top-down view of Aboriginal paintings.

One viewer, Albert Namatjira, was particularly entranced and, having looked at the paintings a long time, remarked to the pastor in charge, "I can do the same".

At about the same time, Rex recorded in his diary: "Albert who does the poker work would like to paint and Mr Albrecht (Pastor Albrecht) is prepared to buy him paints and wants me to tell him what to get".

And so a relationship began that, within five years, would see Albert Namatjira hold his first shows in Melbourne and Adelaide: both sold out.

An artistic legend was born.



Rex Battarbee in his later years, as photographed by Rennie Ellis, circa 1970. Image © Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive. National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.

\You can see Rex Battarbee's painting of his family home, *Skiddaw*, at [the Warrnambool Art Gallery website here](#). You can also view Albert Namatjira's work at the [National Gallery of Australia website here](#).



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