

THE SEARCH FOR THE LOST ANZAC TORAH

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On 15 September 2003 the Perth Hebrew Congregation held a *Siyyum Sefer Torah* to celebrate the rediscovery and re-dedication of a Torah scroll that accompanied the Australian Jewish soldiers on the battlefields of the First World War but which had subsequently disappeared from history. The following is the story of my search for the missing ANZAC Torah.

In 1923 Harold Boas (1883–1980), compiled the *Australian Jewry Book of Honour*¹ to commemorate the Australian Jews who fought in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as a part of the British Army during the Great War, 1914–18. Boas, from Perth, had been the YMCA's Jewish representative during the war, and as such was responsible for arranging the entertainment and religious programs for the Jewish soldiers as well as the burial of Jewish soldiers killed in action. He was organising aid to the official ANZAC Chaplain, Major Reverend (Rabbi) David Freedman (1874–1939), who was also from Perth.

In 2002, one of the few remaining original copies of the Book of Honour was borrowed by me from Joe Salfas, who was president of the Victorian Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen (VAJEX). The *Book of Honour* contains a number of photographs under the heading 'Australian Jewish Services in the Field'. It appears likely that most of these photographs were taken at Salisbury Plain in England where many Australian soldiers were trained before departure for the battlefields of the Western Front in northern France and Flanders in southern Belgium. It was one of these photographs, of ANZAC chaplain David Freedman holding up a beautifully encased small Torah of the Sephardi style at a prayer service of Australian Jewish soldiers, that caught my eye.

What were the origins of this Torah? Where was it now? Were the current custodians aware of its significance? These were questions I asked myself.

It would be an understatement to say that Reverend Freedman was a truly remarkable man from a remarkable Jewish community. In Australian Jewish history, there would be few other Orthodox rabbis who have attracted as much acclaim and respect from the wider general community. He was, from his arrival in 1897 until his death in 1939, one of the key personalities in Perth, and a pioneering founder and leader of many institutions of that city in its early days. Not only was he famed for his intellect and wisdom but he became a co-founder or trustee of many of Western Australia's early institutions including its university, its public museum, library and art gallery, and its hospital. Later, he was to become chairman of the Board of Education, a leader of the Freemasons, a founder of the Children's

Protection Society and the Returned Services League.² He was even the patron of the East Perth Cricket Club. He was, of course, the Rabbi of the Perth Hebrew congregation though he acquired his rabbinical *semicha* (ordination) only while in Egypt during the war. This was conferred on him in Egypt by the exiled Rabbi Goldenbloom of the Yeshiva of Jaffa and the Hassidic Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Keizer, both of whom Freedman met in Egypt in 1916.³ Unlike other Anglo-trained rabbis of his day, Freedman grasped the Zionist ideal, encouraged the formation of Hebrew classes for Jewish children and ongoing studies in the Hebrew language. He was the founder of Australia's first Zionist movement, which surprisingly emanated from Perth. One reason for the prominence of Perth in Australian Zionist history is the fact that many of its Jews were originally Hebrew-speakers from Zefat (Safed), and other parts of Palestine, and had sought opportunities in Western Australia that were impossible in the extremely harsh conditions of Turkish Ottoman Palestine, especially during recurrent long periods of drought in Palestine.

As a measure of the high regard in which Reverend Freedman was held, he represented the Australian government at a conference of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1933.⁴ His intellect, kindness, oratorical skills, musical and pedagogical skills applied to education broadly throughout Perth and in the Hebrew studies he conducted for Jewish children made him one of Perth's most valued citizens.

The Perth Jewish community had a remarkable history in terms of the esteem accorded to it from the earliest days of Perth's development into a city. Undoubtedly, part of this was attributable to the status accorded to Reverend Freedman. According to communal historian, the late Dr David Mossenson, Freedman forged close personal links with the Anglican Bishop Charles Riley (1854–1929) and later Catholic Bishop Clune (1864–1935).⁵ Dr Mossenson suggested to me that the two bishops and the rabbi were consulted at the highest political levels on many important communal and political issues affecting Perth. The hardworking Jews of Perth were also highly respected for their strong family values, their community philanthropy and many talents that they contributed to the business, social and cultural life of the city.

The high rate of recruitment and mortality of the Jewish men who enlisted into the AIF at the commencement of the Great War⁶ were factors which led the Perth general community to support the commemoration of a special Jewish War Memorial in Kings Park. It sits in close proximity to the main War Memorial in Kings Park overlooking the city. Its foundation stone was laid by General Sir John Monash (1865–1931) during a short stopover on his return to Australia in December 1919. Monash led Australians at the vanguard of the Allied forces, winning massive victories across northern France from July 1918 onwards.⁷ The Perth Jewish War Memorial is unique inasmuch as it has become part of the tradition of governors and premiers of the state of Western Australia always to lay two wreaths on days of public commemoration, one being for the Jewish War Memorial.

Reverend Freedman wrote many letters home (despite his claim that he loved ‘to put off writing’⁸), and these reported his numerous responsibilities for Australian Jewish soldiers on or near the fields of battle. These were published in the *Jewish Herald* which circulated from its place of publication in Melbourne. One such letter, published on 11 August 1916, was addressed by Chaplain Freedman to E. S. Lazarus, the then president of the Perth Hebrew Congregation. The letter had been written on 22 May 1916 but its delay in publication can be partially attributed to how long it may have taken letters to reach home. In the letter, Chaplain Freedman wrote:

In Cairo, where, as I have mentioned, I spent the last days of Pesach, Cattai Pasha presented me with a small Sepher Torah for use at my services in the different camps. It is enclosed in a wooden case, which is flat-bottomed so that the surface stands direct with it. It goes without saying that the soldiers are very pleased to hear the Law as part of the service. They like being ‘called up’ and to have the opportunity of saying the blessings. The last I held was in the desert at a spot not far from where the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea. Probably our ancestors had trod the ground we were standing on. The thought touched the imagination that sons of Israel, armed for battle in the cause of the freedom of the world, should be assembled in prayer on the very ground where, four thousand years ago, our forefathers stood soon after they had struck the first blow for a free nationhood. At the reading of the Law, General Monash stood *Segen*⁹, and the three called to the Law were Major Margolin, Captain Hyman, and Lieutenant Goldstein. All day, as I did all week I spent with this Division, it scorched terrifically. It was a very trying week, and demanded of us all the strength of our endurance. The sun burnt us, the dust-laden wind choked us, and the sand baked us. I have now learned to forgive all the murmurings of our forbears in the desert, and I can appreciate more than ever I did their splendid spirit of endurance during their 40 years wandering in this parched country.¹⁰

Rabbi John Levi’s biography of Rabbi Jacob Danglow (1880–1962) also refers to the Torah being given by the Egyptian Jewish community head Cattai Pasha (alternatively spelled Qattawi Pasha), who was born either 1848 or 1850¹¹ and died in 1924, to the Reverend Freedman. My research found that the *Jewish Herald* first referred to Cattai in a letter it published of the British Jewish Chaplain Reverend Michael Adler (1868–1944) from ‘Maurice de Cattai Pasha of Cairo’, which stated:

... I am most happy to learn that you have had the Prayer-books distributed to all Australian soldiers resident in Egypt, to enable them to take part in religious services every Saturday ... For my part, I am

glad to tell you that I have already arranged for all Jewish officers and soldiers stationed at Cairo to celebrate the Seder evening in religious Jewish families whose names I have given them, and from whom I have obtained invitations for them.¹²

A letter appeared in the same edition of that newspaper by an Australian soldier, Lieutenant Arnold Isaacson, to the same Chaplain Adler:

... The C. O. of the regiment I was connected with was good enough to send your Prayer-book to me. I think it a splendid book, and just a nice size ... Some of the private Jewish families here have been good enough to ask what Jewish soldiers they know for the Seder nights. A number of Jewish officers have been invited to His Excellency Cattai Pasha's house for first and second night Seder.¹³

Through Andrew Strum, a Melbourne barrister and a descendant of the Cattai family, as well as from information available from the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, I was able to find further information on Cattai Pasha and his relatives who had donated the Torah to Reverend Freedman. The Cattai clan were probably the wealthiest family in Egypt at the commencement of the twentieth century.

The information from the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt¹⁴ describes the magnificence of the Cattai residence on Cherifein Street situated in the middle of a large garden overlooking what is today Tallat Harb Square, one of the most prominent points of reference in Cairo. At the time of their prominence in Egypt, there were several Cairo streets named after members of the Cattai family, and the Cattais were generous hosts to kings, princes, presidents, diplomats and to business associates, as well as to the ANZAC Jewish soldiers.

Moise De Cattai was a director with his other family members of the National Bank of Egypt, which opened in June 1898. But even before the National Bank was created, he and others in the Cattai dynasty were directors of several other banks and large companies in Egypt until the 1930s, by which time several had retired or passed away. By many accounts, at the time of the Great War, it was said the Cattais were the fulcrum of the Egyptian business and social world. They were reputed to wield great power, but were known as exceptionally kind and generous people.

In 1906, on account of his service to the Hapsburgs and his representation of the Austro-Hungarian colony in Egypt, Cattai Pasha was granted Hungarian nobility status in 1906, entitling the family with the appendage of 'de' and so Moise (or Maurice as occasion demanded) Cattai was also called Moise de Cattai Pasha. The Egyptian title 'Pasha' was the titular equivalent of a lord. In 1909, Cattai Pasha inaugurated an Israelite School situated on Hassan al-Akbar Street.¹⁵

It was in the course of my historical research on the life of Sir John Monash that I had first discovered the photograph of Reverend Freedman from the aforementioned *Book of Honour*. I became interested in the little Torah that he was

shown holding, and I had dubbed it ‘The ANZAC Torah’ even though it was never in Gallipoli where the name ANZAC had first been used as an acronym for Australia New Zealand Army Corps. It is clear that the Torah was given to Reverend Freedman towards the end or shortly after Passover in 1916, about four months after the Australian evacuation from ANZAC Cove beach on the Gallipoli peninsula. Reverend Freedman had arrived at ANZAC Cove late in the campaign and returned to Egypt with the surviving Australian troops. Some of them were shifted soon afterwards directly to the Western Front in France or Flanders. Monash, who was at the time a Brigadier General in charge of the Fourth Brigade at ANZAC Cove, returned likewise to Egypt with the surviving members of his Fourth Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Eliazar Margolin¹⁶ was in the 16th Battalion which was one of the four battalions that comprised the Fourth Brigade. By July 1916, Monash had taken charge of the Australian Third Division¹⁷ to be comprised of a new contingent of Australian volunteers arriving directly in England from Australia, totalling about 20,000 men whom Monash was responsible for training. In the course of his work on both sides of the English Channel, Reverend Freedman joined this contingent near Salisbury, England, where the photograph of him with the Torah was taken.

I began my search for the missing Torah on the assumption that it had returned back to Australian shores with either of the First World War Australian Jewish chaplains, Chaplain Freedman, or his successor Reverend Jacob Danglow of St Kilda Hebrew Congregation. Danglow had replaced Freedman as Jewish war chaplain in May 1918.¹⁸

My communication with St Kilda Hebrew Congregation yielded no success in locating the Torah, so I contacted the Perth Hebrew Congregation, where Rabbi Freedman had been in charge for his entire working life. No one in the Perth Hebrew Congregation, including its archivist Michelle Urban, was able to trace the whereabouts of the Torah or to discover what had happened to it. The Perth Chevra Kadisha had no record to indicate that the Torah had been buried, even though the stress of climatic change from the hot deserts of Egypt to the icy cold of Northern France might have been expected to have had a deleterious effect.¹⁹

I made telephone contact with the late Dr David Mossenson, the Perth Jewish community stalwart and former director-general of the WA Department of Education, an historian of note.²⁰ Dr Mossenson told me by telephone, and later wrote to me, about the Torah, stating that ‘As a lad I admired it frequently in the main hall of the old State Library’.²¹

Dr Mossenson’s telephone communication was all the verification I needed that the Torah had, indeed, returned to Australia. I then wrote an article in the *Australian Jewish News*²² to tell readers about the Torah and inviting any reader to let me know if they knew something of its whereabouts.

Researching through the depth of *Jewish Herald* archives at the State Library

of Victoria at night, together with several unsuccessful communications, made headway difficult. It was only the exceptionally good memories of the elderly and wise Dr Mossenson and a Sydney-based couple, Rose and Amram Halprin, that gave me encouragement and kept me on track in my search for the missing ANZAC Torah.

The breakthrough came following the article in the *Australian Jewish News* when Rose and Amram Halprin, who had read it, telephoned the newspaper's Sydney manager. Excitedly, editor Dan Goldberg, who was then based at the Melbourne office, telephoned to let me know, and I returned Mr and Mrs Halprin's call. The Halprins had lived, met and married in Perth before the Second World War. They informed me that they had seen the Torah during the late 1960s in a walkway in the old building complex housing the old Library and Art Gallery in Perth. They knew what it was as they had seen the same Torah on display many years earlier, before the Second World War, when Dr Mossenson had also seen it. Amram Halprin was later quoted by the *Australian Jewish News*: 'I remember seeing it in a display cabinet on the south wall of the public library. I remember it had a green cover and only stood at 40 or 50 centimetres high.'²³

These clear memories not only revealed that the Torah returned to Australia but conveyed the idea that the Torah might still have been in the hands of the Western Australian Museum. The descriptions gave a distinct indication of how unique this Torah was. I sent the following description to employees of the museum, art gallery and library based on Dr Mossenson's and the Halprin's recollections:

The Torah is a small Sephardi-style Torah encased in a box (known by Sephardi Jews as a 'tiq'). In the case of this Torah, although unusual for any Sephardi Torah, it also had a dark green velvet piece of material, which Rabbi Freedman always used as a wrapper for further protection of this Torah. Being of Anglo Jewish tradition, Rabbi Freedman would read the Torah lying flat on a table rather than the usual Sephardi tradition of reading it from the upright position, and also used the green cover to cover the Torah during readings.²⁴

I discovered that at the time during which the Torah was being displayed in Perth, the library, museum and art gallery all comprised one institution, governed by the same Board. Moreover, Reverend Freedman had been a trustee of these organisations. Indeed, Dr Mossenson later told me that he (Mossenson) had already attempted to locate the Torah from the Board of the same institution: 'Many years ago when there was a local attempt to assemble artefacts for a display I endeavoured to recover or borrow back the little Sefer Torah and communicated with the Library and Museum Boards only to be finally refused with the assurances that examination of their gifted and loaned items inventories revealed no record of the item and a search had failed to reveal any such object.'²⁵

My initial communications with the archivist of the Library of West Australian

History were unusual. According to the archivist, the library was no longer in possession of the Torah; but the archivist claimed that the library's records stated that the Torah had been given to the library in 1945. Not only was this six years after Reverend Freedman's death, but it was surely against Jewish law for a Rabbi to have given away a Torah. I quote the following from a subsequent email I received in reply to my enquiries from the archivist David Whiteford:

The Torah came into government possession when the Library, Museum and Art Gallery were one body and ... it seems likely that it may be in the possession of the Western Australian Museum. When I initially emailed you, I was not aware that David Freedman had died in 1939. So that makes the acquisition of the Torah by the Library, Museum and Art Gallery at least six years earlier than 1945 which is when a register record was made. The date of acquisition in the register is given as 1918 *but it is impossible now to tell whether there is any accuracy in that.* [Emphasis added.]²⁶

At this point, I was joined in my search by Perth Hebrew Congregation honorary archivist Michelle Urban, and together we mounted pressure on the Western Australian Museum to locate the Torah. However, after numerous inquiries going back and forth, the Western Australian Museum denied that they still had the missing Torah in their possession.

Despite denials made directly in response to appeals by Michelle Urban and the lack of response to my further inquiries, the Museum must have known of the Torah in its collection of Jewish artefacts. As I mentioned, it had been on display in the 1960s, as attested to by the Halprins, and yet no one in the Museum administration seemingly thought to contact any synagogue in Perth in relation to the origins of the Torah.

Then suddenly, in August 2003, the director of the Perth-based Shoshan Sodot Foundation for the Restoration of Jewish Texts and Artefacts, Rabbi Moshe Yehuda Bernstein, was contacted by the Western Australian Museum through its registrar of anthropology, Ross Chadwick, to identify a particular item. Rabbi Bernstein was unaware of the controversy simmering in the background; nor was he aware that there was a missing Torah. He simply identified the scroll he was asked to identify as a Sephardi Torah but did not realise that it was the misplaced ANZAC Torah.

Once Rabbi Bernstein explained to the Museum that the Torah may have belonged to the local Jewish community, the news of its 'discovery' was conveyed to the Perth Hebrew Congregation, the dots were soon joined and my journey was complete. The missing ANZAC Torah, which had followed the Jews through the sands of the deserts of Egypt and through the mud and slime and haunting chill of the Western Front during the Great War, had been found. The Torah had returned to Australia with Reverend Freedman in 1918, had gone missing in action, but had now been found and identified.

Once the Torah had been located, there was a string of different communications from the Museum as to what the Torah had been doing there, unaccounted for. After the initial stonewalling, with a claim that the Museum's records were confidential, there was a statement that the records showed that the Torah had been 'gifted' six years after Reverend Freedman's death.

The next claim issued by the Museum was that Reverend Freedman had given the Torah to the Museum as its Trustee. As previously discussed, it is highly implausible that an esteemed and renowned rabbi would *give* an historic Torah away to the secular general community.

The theory I put to the Museum was that Reverend Freedman had loaned the Torah to the Museum at some stage before his death. After his death in 1939 I believed the Museum failed in its due diligence to contact the Jewish community to return the loaned Torah but had repacked it, only to redisplay the artefact in a 1960s display with a visiting display of extracts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Ross Chadwick has publicly refuted this theory: '[Mr Chadwick] said that Rabbi Freedman most likely gave the Torah to the Museum for safekeeping amid a Jewish communal dispute where it should be housed', reported the *Australian Jewish News*. 'Even though the library had registered the Torah as a gift, the museum had never entered the Torah in its inventory, on the proviso that it was merely on loan, he said. He also claimed that there had been an attempt in the 1970s to return the Torah to Perth's Jewish community.'²⁷

This claim fails because at the end of that time in the 1970s there was only one synagogue in Perth and the claim did not address the initial denials by the Museum, the discrepancies in the record-keeping, the lack of any evidence of any attempted return in the Perth Hebrew Congregation records and finally the failure to accede to a request by Dr Mossenson for the recovery of the Torah. It should be noted that Dr Mossenson himself was one of the Trustees of the Perth Hebrew Congregation.

But these questions will probably never be satisfactorily answered and, while of investigatory interest, any further argument would miss the point. The Torah has been properly restored to its home in the Perth Jewish community.

On 15 September 2003, the celebratory parade and traditional religious dancing with the Torah took place with the official return of the Torah to its resting place, the ark of the Perth Hebrew Congregation. The traditional *Hachnasat Sefer Torah* followed by the *Siyum Sefer Torah* followed the tradition of a new Torah having been written and presented to the synagogue. Officials of the Western Australian government, leading members of the Western Australian parliament, representatives of the Western Australian Museum and a large audience representing a broad cross-section of the Western Australian Jewish community attended, and a wide array of photographs recorded the event.

The importance of this *Sefer Torah* cannot be overemphasised. Dr Mossenson

wrote to me that it was a reminder of Reverend Freedman's astonishing contributions to his community and country (he went on to represent Australia at the League of Nations).

'His contribution to Perth Jewry was overwhelming', Mossenson noted. 'A [biography of Freedman] would enrich our knowledge of Australian-Jewish history, correcting the substantial omission ...'²⁸

Although I was not at the ceremony for the handover and the *Siyum* in celebration, I wrote to Rabbi Freilich of the Perth Hebrew Congregation shortly afterwards:

I believe that this Torah is very significant in terms of identification of Jews with Australian history at an important time – potentially even assisting the Australian Jewish community in the same way that General Monash's high standing and reputation served to protect Australian Jews from the rabid anti-semitism and charges of 'dual loyalty' that were prevalent amongst anti-semites in England during the 1930s.

This is apart from the fact that a Torah is our holiest object whilst ANZAC Day has become a sanctified day in Australia's national civic consciousness.

I would like this Torah – because of its ANZAC connections – to become a symbol of Australian Jewish community pride and identification of the continuing Jewish historical connection in Australian history.²⁹

I have also expressed the hope that this Sefer Torah might be lent out for important occasions as a symbol of the Jewish contribution to Australia and as the symbolic link for all Australians to see the Jewish heritage link with this wonderful country.

Endnotes

- 1 Harold Boas, *Australian Jewry Book of Honour: the Great War, 1914–1918* (Perth: Lamson Paragon, WA, 1923).
- 2 See David Mossenson, *The Perth Hebrew Congregation 1892 – 2002* (Perth: Perth Hebrew Congregation, 2003), p. 21 and David Mossenson assisted by Louise Hoffman, *Hebrew, Israelite, Jew: The Jews of Western Australia* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1990).
- 3 From 'Letter from Chaplain Freedman', *Jewish Herald*, 22 September 1916.
- 4 Phillip Masel, 'David Isaac Freedman', *AJ HJSJ*, vol. 11, part 5 (1992), p. 752.
- 5 See Mossenson, *Hebrew, Israelite, Jew*, at p. 78.
- 6 *Ibid*, pp. 88–89: 'By August 1915 40 men had joined the [Australian] force, and four had died in active service [cited from the Perth Hebrew Congregation Annual report for 1915]. A total of 180 Western Australian Jews served overseas between 1914 and 1918, many were wounded and 47 were killed [cited from the Perth Hebrew Congregation Annual report for 1920].'

- 7 General Sir John Monash, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918* (London: Hutchinson, 1920).
- 8 From Reverend Freedman's letter to E. S. Lazarus, 22 May 1916, published in *Jewish Herald* on 11 August 1916.
- 9 *Segen* is a person standing by the Torah participating in the blessings and Torah readings. In Hebrew, it also means 'lieutenant'.
- 10 Freedman to Lazarus dated 22 May 1916, published loc. cit.
- 11 See website: <http://www.hsje.org/The%20House%20oof%20Yacoub%20Cattai.html>
- 12 From Maurice de Cattai's letter to Chaplain Adler, published in *Jewish Herald*, 4 June 1915.
- 13 From Lieutenant Isaacson's letter to Chaplain Adler, published *ibid*.
- 14 Website: <http://www.hsje.org/The%20House%20oof%20Yacoub%20Cattai.html>
- 15 *Ibid*.
- 16 See Rodney Goultman, *An Anzac Hero: The Life of Lieutenant-Colonel Eliazar Margolin* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006) and my [Joe Lederman's] article on the life of Margolin, *Australian Jewish News*, 27 April 2001.
- 17 See also F. M. Cutlack (Ed.), *War Letters of General Monash* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935, 1st ed.), p. 120.
- 18 See J. S. Levi, *Rabbi Jacob Danglow: 'The Uncrowned Monarch' of Australia's Jews* (Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 95. Danglow was based in England for most of his time as chaplain but visited a secure area in France far from the battlefields during October and November 1918 when the war was almost over.
- 19 According to Ashkenazic rites, a Torah is buried like a person either in a cemetery or in a *Genizah*. Some *shuls* are built with a *Genizah* below the *Aharon Hakodesh* (the holy ark that holds the Torah scrolls of the *shul*).
- 20 Dr Mossenson authored two books on Perth Jewry, *The Perth Hebrew Congregation 1892 – 2002* (Perth: Perth Hebrew Congregation, 2003), and *Hebrew, Israelite, Jew – The Jews of Western Australia* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1990).
- 21 From a letter written by Dr David Mossenson to Joe Lederman, 7 October 2003.
- 22 *Australian Jewish News*, 25 April 2003.
- 23 *Ibid*, 26 September 2003.
- 24 From an email sent by Joe Lederman to the Western Australian Museum, Art Gallery and Library, dated 9 May 2003.
- 25 Mossenson to Lederman, 7 October 2003.
- 26 From an email written by David Whiteford, Archivist, J. S. Battye Library of West Australian History, to Joe Lederman, 20 June 2003.
- 27 See Alana Rosenbaum, 'Lost and found: the 87-year odyssey of the ANZAC Torah', *Australian Jewish News*, 26 September 2003.
- 28 Mossenson to Lederman, 7 October 2003.
- 29 From an email sent by Joe Lederman to Rabbi Freilich, 19 September 2003.