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HISTORY MAGAZINE
JUNE 2017



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Monument to the Gentlemen's Clubs, a plaque set into the footpath opposite Parliament House Sydney, n.d. [Photograph Graham Sciberras 2017]

In December 1888 a Goulburn newspaper editorialised against those it claimed were preserving ‘Old Corruption’ at work in the railways of New South Wales.¹ Old Corruption, usually shown in political caricatures as a lecherous old man, sometimes contemptuously baring his bottom, has a long history in British countries, and claims of his nefarious influences in 1888 lead us straight to the complex parquetry and carved cedar halls of History House.²

Mr Joseph Palmer (JP) Abbott was, in 1889, a 45 year-old Muswellbrook-born solicitor specialising in land law, and a founder of the legal firm Abbott & Allen.³ He was a member of the Legislative Assembly from 1880 to 1901, initially as a Free Trader serving as a Minister of the Crown in several ministries.⁴ By March 1887 he had changed sides and was leader of the Protectionist opposition in the Assembly. In the 1889 election he stood for both his current pastoral seat of Wentworth and the urban seat of East Sydney. East Sydney was acclaimed as the “crack metropolitan constituency”, containing most of the city business district, Parliament House and Government House.⁵ It was in this period that JP Abbott inferred he came face to face with Old

Corruption in the courtly salons of the Warrigal Club (now History House).

A sensational story appeared in the Sydney papers in April 1888 claiming that the city’s leading gentlemen’s clubs (the Union, of which Abbott was a member, the Australian, the Reform, the Warrigal, the Sydney, the New South Wales and the Athenaeum) could, between them, muster over a thousand votes from their members who claimed, upon payment of £10 per year, to reside in the clubs. These gentlemen’s votes swamped those of the electorate’s working-class men. They had East Sydney in their gentle pockets. The working-class East Sydneysiders, however, were to be championed by Mr JP Abbott, who was going to contest in court the enrolment of one of the gentlemen, Vandemonian-born Sir William Clarke, Baronet, of Melbourne.⁶

Abbott argued before the magistrate that The Warrigal Club claimed to have 93 members but only ten bedrooms, and that Sir William had not occupied any room for six months continuously prior to the current electoral roll being drawn up, as required under the electoral laws. However, the law also allowed ‘non-residents’ to be enrolled who possessed,

either on their own or with others, property within the electorate with an annual value of £10, making each entitled to a vote. The argument, therefore, was whether such gentlemen, by paying an annual subscription for club membership, also acquired a vote in East Sydney.⁷ Abbott argued the practice was a widespread, contrary to the spirit of the electoral laws, and corrupting.

During the court hearing, a note from Sir William Clarke was read in which he stated he had “no desire ... to be included in the list of voters”.⁸ However, the Warrigal Club’s lawyer had other gentlemen-members in need of his advocacy. He argued each club member had a vested interest in the club as property, and therefore was entitled to be enrolled as a property owner. The magistrate Mr Fisher accepted claims for enrolment from a trustee for a landholder and the directors of a company owning land.⁹ However, he accepted Abbott’s argument, and ordered Sir William’s name struck from the roll. Abbott triumphantly announced his intention to have all such gentlemen voters struck from the rolls.

The next summer a general election was held, with polling for various seats over January and February 1889. Abbott was returned unopposed as member for Wentworth. However, he also remained a candidate for East Sydney, which he also expected to win, in which case he would resign East Sydney and nominate in his place Edward O’Sullivan, the sitting member for Queanbeyan who was expected to be defeated. O’Sullivan was described in Sydney’s *Evening News* as:

...the noisy nuisance who ... [has] industriously misrepresented Queanbeyan ... But politicians of the O’Sullivan type, if they can be of no service to their country, have their uses in party warfare in Parliament.¹⁰

Each seat elected several members, and East Sydney returned four free traders.¹¹ Neither Abbott nor his proxy O’Sullivan were among the four, as Abbott already held Wentworth and O’Sullivan, against expectations, held on to Queanbeyan.¹² The Protectionists ultimately were able to have George Dibbs elected as premier, but with the new Labour League holding the balance of power and demanding electoral reforms.

Abbott, after his failure to win East Sydney, and despite his earlier threats to disenfranchise the gentlemen voters of the Warrigal and other clubs, took no further action on the matter. That was left for the nascent Labour Party to argue, and in 1893 the new *Elections Act* prevented candidates standing in multiple seats, restricted voting to only one seat (so, in effect, abolishing the ‘club’ vote), and required general elections to be held on a single day.¹³ The ‘pocket’ seat of East Sydney was abolished, replaced by the single-member seat of Sydney-King that remained an anti-Abbott Free Trade stronghold until 1901.¹⁴

And what of the protagonists? The baronet was a well-known Victorian philanthropist, who after being hoisted by Abbott’s petard in 1889 was reported welcoming Sydney Burdekin, Free Trade member for East Sydney to the Melbourne Liedertafel; opening a Catholic fundraising International Fair at Ballarat; and assisting NSW Governor Lord Carrington install the Earl of Kintore as Grand Master

of the Grand (Masonic) Lodge of South Australia.¹⁵ Sir William was a social progressive, a federalist and ecumenical, and like the East Sydney MPs, a free trader. Abbott became parliamentary Speaker in 1890, and in 1891 and 1897 a delegate to the federation conventions arguing for federation, protection and a weak senate. He was a devout Anglican, and like Clarke a mason, invested in 1895 as Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of NSW. Despite their political differences, they both belonged to the ‘old colonist’ class. ‘Noisy’ O’Sullivan outlasted them both, becoming Minister for Public Works responsible for building Central Station, a Labor MP in 1909 and dying in office.

So, was Abbott really the champion of East Sydney’s working men as he claimed? Or, instead, was his case against the baronet simply a tactic in “party warfare”, as *The Evening News* implied, intended to “humiliate the premier constituency”, strengthen his ties with O’Sullivan and weaken a free trade stronghold? Were his claims of confronting Old Corruption in the cedar’d halls of the Warrigal Club, and his trophy scalp of a free-trader baronet, mere humbug? The subsequent electoral reforms and abolition of the ‘pocket borough’ make it seem JP Abbott was indeed a true democrat, but none of these later reforms were publicly championed by him.

This episode is now largely forgotten, and only came to light when the RAHS made a submission supporting a National Heritage List nomination for Macquarie Street, including History House. The evidence of the building’s time as the gilded Warrigal Club remains in its sumptuous parquet floors, baroque cedar joinery and grand reception rooms, but the story of JP Abbott, Sir William Clarke, ‘Noisy’ O’Sullivan and the gentlemen’s pocket borough of East Sydney lay in the historical documents.¹⁶

Glimpsing Old Corruption’s bare bottom on Macquarie Street in 1889 depended, it seems, on which way you looked.

About the Author

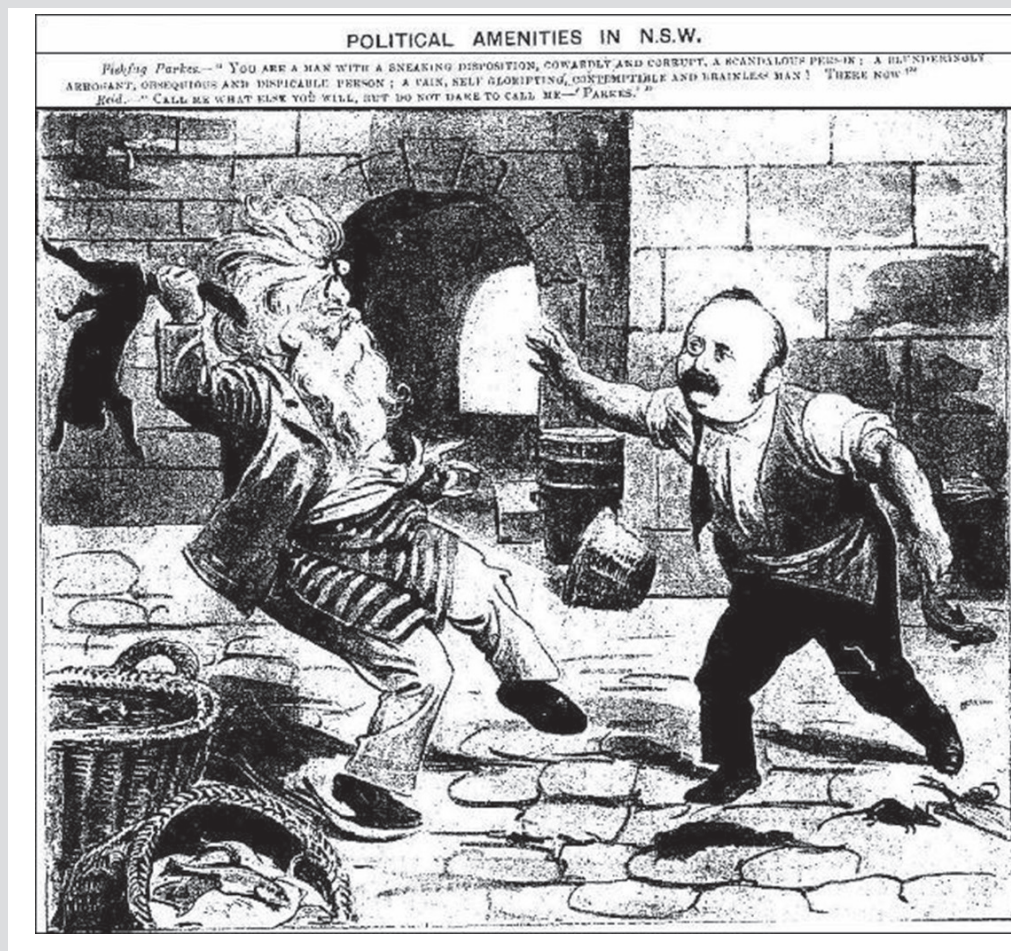
Bruce Baskerville is an independent public historian, an RAHS Councillor and member of several affiliated societies, including The Australian Heraldry Society of which he is president.

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- ¹⁴ Eamonn Clifford 2006: 35
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- ¹⁶ for more on colonial perspectives on pocket boroughs and rotten boroughs, see Miles Taylor, 'Empire and Parliamentary Reform: The 1832 Reform Act Revisited', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850*, Cambridge University Press, 2003: 295-312



A view from Sir William Clarke's seat of the 'noisy party warfare' of the period, with opposition leader Parkes and Premier Reid cast as querulous fishmongers squabbling in front of a stout thick wall and arch suggesting the rude convict legacy. The caption reads:

Fishfag Parkes: "You are a man with a sneaking disposition, cowardly and corrupt, a scandalous person, a blytheringly arrogant, obsequious and despicable person, a vain, self-glorifying, contemptible and brainless man. There now!"

Reid: "Call me what else you will, but do not dare to call me 'Parkes'."

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