

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1522

'Pompous Git
or Good Bloke?'

‘Pompous Git or Good Bloke?’

Most of us would like to believe that our colonial forebears were ‘good people’; genuine contributors to a developing colony or at least lovable rogues. And in my own case this does appear to be true. However, there is one forebear, a great, great uncle named George Williams LEE, who made me nervous.....

In September 1861, a correspondent for the Victorian newspaper the *Gippsland Guardian* gave an account of a speech given by George Williams LEE to the people of Sale. George was on the electioneering trail as a nominee for the candidature for the seat of North Gippsland in the Legislative Assembly of Victoria. The correspondent blasted him, calling him ‘Judas Iscariot’; ‘the fetid refuse of the Eastern Market’.¹ The vitriol made for disturbing reading. Was he a ‘good bloke’ or a foolish one full of his own self-importance?

George Williams LEE was a previously unknown member of my immigrant story. He appeared on my radar during the search for my great grandfather, Edward LEE.

Edward LEE arrived in Melbourne in 1863, as a 23 year old ‘trader’. He trained as a wood engraver in England and was employed by the colonial illustrated newspapers of early Melbourne. The 1851 English census for the parish of Newington, County Surrey shows Edward living with his parents, a servant and four siblings, the eldest sibling being George Williams LEE, Profession—‘AKC (Associate, King’s College, London), ‘Builder’. A will/probate search through the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) website for Edward was unsuccessful but the details in probate papers found for a George Williams LEE, confirmed he was in fact, Edward’s brother.²

George Williams LEE (from now on referred to as GWL) arrived in Port Phillip on the 2nd December 1852, eleven years prior to his brother Edward, as a 21 year old ‘gold seeker’.³ Letters written ‘home’ to England by George Morton who shared a cabin with GWL on the *Blackwall* revealed that they walked to the gold diggings of Forest Creek, near Castlemaine shortly after their arrival. Life was hard and George Morton lamented, ‘...to make money and then return to dear old England is the business of our lives’.⁴ By March 1853 they were back in Melbourne.

In September 1853, GWL built a house in Fitzroy Melbourne⁵ and a few months later he placed an advertisement in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, selling a selection of books on metallurgy, architecture, the steam engine, surveying, mining and drawing instruments.⁶ A not surprising collection considering his education. Perhaps he had given up on gold-mining.

A search for GWL on TROVE, the searchable website for Australian digitized newspapers produced many ‘hits’ in the Melbourne newspapers of the 1850s. He was ‘secretary’ for the National Land League,⁷ the Eight Hours Movement,⁸ the Newspaper Company⁹ and the People’s Club—a place where ‘newly arrived immigrants can obtain advice, free of cost’; ‘a digger’s protection’ and ‘a progressive centre for the people’.¹⁰ He wrote a Letter to the Editor of *The Argus* questioning the use of expensive iron on the railways when there wasn’t enough money to make them safely.¹¹ He was involved in public meetings at the Eastern Market¹² —a place where people gathered for the entertainment of political jousting and a site over a hundred years later where a crowd of screaming teenagers would gather to sight the *Beatles* at the Southern Cross Hotel. A dramatic change in a society’s idea of entertainment.

In early September 1861, it was reported that the newly elected member for North Gippsland, John Everard, was ineligible to take up the position as he was pronounced insolvent—on the day he was elected!¹³ So a new election was called.

On the 11th September 1861, a requisition to stand was made to GWL by some of the constituents of North Gippsland.¹⁴ GWL, now over thirty years old—a prerequisite to serving as a member of the Legislative Assembly—accepted. The constituency of North Gippsland was a mixture of large land holders and miners; ‘an impregnable squatter stronghold’ and the gold mining district of Crooked River.¹⁵ A challenge for any member of the land reforming group, the Land League, whose key objective was to ‘unlock the land’ by breaking up the squatters’ runs.

GWL declared his beliefs in the *Gippsland Times* on 25th September 1861: ‘occupation licenses for residence and cultivation; Upper House reform—reduce the qualifications and increase the number of members and shorten their term of office’; payment of parliamentary members; revision of tariff to increase employment of artisans and manufacturers thereby increasing the market for ‘produce grown by farmers’; national system of education; better administration of justice on the goldfields—District Councils and insolvency courts. He was in favour of abolishing the gold export duty. After reassuring voters of his preparedness to represent them he stated he was ‘not yet intimately acquainted with the nature and extent of the responsibilities involved in a conscientious discharge of the duties of a representative’ and he was willing to retire if a ‘better person was deemed more suitable’.¹⁶

Two other nominees for the ‘liberal causes’ (factions rather than political parties were the order of the day) Mr. W.F. Parker¹⁷ and Dr. George Mackay,¹⁸ a lawyer, were requisitioned. Public meetings in the district ensued. GWL was introduced as a phrenologist;¹⁹ one who studies the shape and size of the skull to elucidate character traits/talents. He gave a lecture on phrenology, a popular pseudoscience of the Victorian era, and after examining the skull of ‘a carpenter with a foreign name’ told him he was a musician. As reported in the *Gippsland Guardian*, ‘the ‘patient declared he did not know a tune and told the lecturer he was a humbug’.²⁰

At one meeting a dispute broke out between Mr. Parker and GWL; ‘they were like a couple of cubs growling at each other’.²¹ GWL found it necessary to write a Letter to the Editor of *The Gippsland Times* refuting the ‘gratuitous slanders’ proposed by a Mr. Anderson,²² a man in favour of Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker, in reply, stated, ‘Mr. Lee has been systematically endeavouring, by underhand, unfair conduct, to get himself elected member for North Gippsland’. He accused him of writing his own requisition. And ‘Mr. Lee defies any living man to say that he was desirous of coming forward....Oh! Immaculate, most virtuous George Williams Lee’.²³ Mr. Parker retired from the candidature. No reason given.

The *Gippsland Guardian* described GWL as ‘a very argumentative gentleman’; ‘Mephistophilean’, adding, ‘intellect he has given no evidence of possessing and the letter ‘h’ he utterly ignores’.²⁴ As to his lack of intellect, evidence from King’s College refutes this: ‘amongst the list of those presented prizes ‘at the Public Distribution, on the 29th June, 1849, by His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury’ was George Williams Lee for Third Year Divinity, Arts of Construction, and Chemical Manipulation’.²⁵

GWL was not trusted according to the *Gippsland Guardian*: ‘he’s not a settler of Gipps Land’ (not a requirement of candidature in 1861) and so wasn’t known to the people. He was ‘using Melbourne influence to get elected’. He was ‘...a free thinker. Could anything be more base?’

1522 - ‘Pompous Git or Good Bloke?’

He bewitched the crowd with ‘voluminous speeches’ about his early boyhood and college days and his time on the goldfields, puddling, reporting on the Collingwood Observer, market gardening, building— ‘going back to the bench’.²⁶ The people enjoyed the speeches and his desire for Australia Felix, Australia Happy.

However, GWL retired from the candidature on the 14th October 1861 at the request of the Land League in favour of Dr. Mackay.²⁷ No reason was given. Dr Mackay said GWL was ‘a gentleman’ for stepping aside.²⁸ I could speculate that the Land League believed they had a better chance of winning the seat with Dr. Mackay because of his knowledge of the law and preferred popularity with the miners. At a miners’ meeting they described GWL’s conduct as ‘suspicious’ and his ‘political integrity doubtful’.²⁹

On the 30th October 1861, Dr Mackay won the seat of North Gippsland over Mr. Wood ‘the squatters’ advocate’³⁰ but ‘turned’ once he was in Parliament much to the disgust of the people who voted for him.³¹

In December the ‘Gippsland agitator’ GW Lee appeared in Warrnambool assisting the liberal causes.³² His name didn’t appear again in the newspapers until the report of his death in 1864. He died in Maffra on his own land which he had secured the year before, from injuries sustained a few days earlier from a kick by a horse he had been treating for ‘an attack of the gripes’.³³ He was 33.

In conclusion, I believe George Williams LEE was ‘a good bloke’; a committed, passionate Australian who believed in self-improvement, social justice, happiness, a work/life balance and jobs for all. He may have given flowery speeches that were a little ‘too philosophical’³⁴ but he was a man who obviously wanted to dispel the social inequalities he had come from; he wanted everyone to have the opportunity to share in the delights of Australia Felix.

¹ *Gippsland Guardian*, 20 September 1861, page 2.

² Public Records Office Victoria (PROV). Probate papers for George Williams LEE. Died 20th June 1864.

³ Passenger List for *Blackwall*. Arrived Port Phillip 2 December 1852. Second class passengers.

⁴ Transcripts of ‘1852-1853 Letters from George Morton to his Mother and Sisters’. Vaughan Evans Library Collection, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney.

⁵ Burchett Index of Fitzroy Ward “Notices to Build” (1850-1870). Compiled by the ‘Fitzroy Residents Association’

⁶ *The Argus*, 20 April 1854, page 8.

⁷ The Crisis Meeting of the National League. *The Age*, 19 November 1861, page 6.

⁸ *The Age*, 10 October 1859, page 5.

⁹ *The Argus*, 11 April 1860, page 8.

¹⁰ Melbourne News. *Bendigo Advertiser*, 30 June 1858, page 2.

¹¹ *The Argus*, 9 October 1857, page 6.

¹² *The Age*, 22 September 1857, page 5.

¹³ Our Election difficulties. *Gippsland Times*, 4 September 1861, page 2.

¹⁴ Requisition to Mr. Lee. *Gippsland Times*, 11 September 1861, page 3.

¹⁵ North Gippsland Election-Mr. Everard’s Meeting. *Gippsland Times*, 16 October 1861, page 2.

¹⁶ Reply. *Gippsland Times*, 25 September 1861, page 3.

¹⁷ North Gippsland Election. *Gippsland Guardian*, 13 September 1861, page 2.

¹⁸ *Gippsland Times*, 25 September 1861, page 3.

¹⁹ Sale. *Gippsland Guardian*, 20 September 1861, page 2.

²⁰ *Gippsland Guardian*, 13 September 1861 page 2,3.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Correspondence. *Gippsland Times*, 25 September 1861 page 2,3.

²³ To the Editor of the Gippsland Times. *Gippsland Times*, 2 October 1861, page 2,3.

²⁴ *Gippsland Guardian*, 13 September 1861, page 2.

-
- ²⁵ Archives, Kings College London as transcribed and forwarded by email.
- ²⁶ *The Age*, 3 October 1861, page 6.
- ²⁷ North Gippsland Election Public Notice. *Gippsland Times*, 16 October 1861 page 3.
- ²⁸ The Mackay Gathering. *The Age*, 27 November 1861, page 5.
- ²⁹ Election Meeting. *Gippsland Times*, 2 October 1861, page 2.
- ³⁰ North Gippsland Election. *The Age*, 30 October 1861, page 5.
- ³¹ Miscellaneous. *Gippsland Times*, 11 December 1861, page 2, 3.
- ³² Local Intelligence. *Gippsland Times*, 18 December 1861, page 2.
- ³³ Town Talk. *Gippsland Times*, 24 June 1864, page 2, 3.
- ³⁴ Electioneering at Sale. *Gippsland Guardian*, 20 September 1861, page 2.