

Our Bunyip Aristocracy

By J. N. RAWLING

DAVID fighting Goliath in Sydney 100 years ago—and David, as in the original story, winning!

It was thus that enthusiastic and excited crowds, packing the Royal Victoria Theatre or milling around earnest orators near Circular Quay in August and September, 1853, must have visualised a political fight that seemed so momentous in its consequences.

The battle centred around the proposed new constitution for New South Wales, and fate and circumstances determined that, to the imagination of many, it should appear as a mortal conflict between this David and this Goliath.

Goliath was William Charles Wentworth, then near the height of his career. Powerful and arrogant, he dominated the political life of the colony from the eminence to which he had been raised by wealth in sheep and lands and the prestige won by a political life of struggle for more than a quarter of a century.

David was Daniel Henry Deniehy who was 25 years old in August, 1853. A diminutive figure—a compact little gentleman, David Blair described him—he was a frequent visitor to the parlour behind Henry Parkes's shop in Hunter Street where the radicals of the early 1850s were wont to meet.

Often he would be seen with his quizzing-glass, poring over books in Sydney's bookstalls and bookshops. He had early achieved a local fame for his precocious learning, and was soaked in the literature and art of modern Europe and the ancient world.

A picture has been preserved of him as a young boy, running errands for his mother, with a book held close to his short-sighted eyes, and being tripped by a rope stretched across the footpath by some to whom a boy with a book was fair game.

The newspapers thought it hilarious also, 20 years later, that Deniehy had several tons of books to move when he shifted from Goulburn to Sydney.

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Deniehy, born in 1828, was one of that band of first Australians, who, born and bred in the sordid circumstances of a convict settlement, often of convict parents, nevertheless lived out lives of

service and beauty that are precious souvenirs of our non-age—Charles Tompson and Charles Harpur, poets; Joseph Harpur, journalist and parliamentarian; Geoffrey Eagar, member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister; Daniel Egan, Mayor of Sydney and Cabinet Minister; George Thornton, twice Mayor of Sydney; W. H. Suttor, father and son, members of Parliament; H. C. Russell, Government Astronomer; William Bede Dalley, first Australian Privy Councillor; Adelaide Ironside, Australia's first woman artist, and many another.

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DENIEHY'S father was successful enough to take him to England in his early teens. There he tried to enter one of the universities, but was too young.

He roamed Europe, however, in the early 1840s, visiting art galleries, libraries, and musical festivals, hearing Liszt play. He saw Ireland, Italy, Vienna, Prague, Germany, Paris, absorbing the romance and history of ancient buildings and crumbling ruins.

Back in Sydney he was articled to N. D. Stenhouse, solicitor and patron of literature and literary men.

He was contributing verse and stories to the Sydney Press from his 17th year. When he was 22, he was delivering to distinguished audiences at the School of Arts—then Sydney's cultural centre—lectures on modern European literature.

"His spoken English," again quoting Blair, "like his written English, was perfect." He overflowed "with wit, learning, and vivacity," while his "manners were those of a born gentleman."

He found a wider audience in those opposing the threatened re-introduction of transportation.

introduction of transportation. Now, in 1853, he was to be acclaimed by those who listened to him with delight as, with wit and satire, but with a sincerity and an earnestness that through his life marked him off from professional politicians, he castigated the would-be aristocrats of this new land and examined the proposals of the constitution-makers.

After the discovery of gold and the separation of Victoria from New South Wales in 1851, the demand for fully responsible government became more insistent. For a quarter of a century Wentworth had voiced it, supported in the early years by the "Native Youth"—the "Currency Lads"—to whom a share of their own land had so often been denied.

Since those years he had laid aside his democratic ideas of a low property qualification for the franchise, but had never been satisfied with the inadequate measure of self-government embodied in the old partly elected, partly nominated Legislative Council. When, therefore, the British Government granted the colony authority to draw up its own constitution he saw his life's ambition about to be realised. He moved for the appointment of a Select Committee to draw up a

constitution. With himself as chairman it met for the first time on May 25, 1853.

On July 28, the committee made its report. The proposed constitution was unsatisfactory to the radicals and liberals of the colony.

Especially obnoxious in their minds was a proposal for the creation of a colonial peerage from which the Upper House was to be recruited. But almost equally hateful were the high property qualification for the franchise, the nominee principle for the Upper House and the provision that a two-thirds majority was to be necessary to change the constitution.

Organised opposition arose at once.

To carry on the fight a public meeting at the Royal Hotel on August 3 appointed a Constitu-

meeting at the Royal Hotel on August 3 appointed a Constitution Committee among whose members were 14 who were later to be elected to Parliament, including two who were to become Premiers: Henry Parkes and Charles Cowper. Anti-constitution meetings were held throughout the colony, Bathurst showing the way.

On Tuesday, August 9, the bill was read a first time; on the following Friday, the Constitution Committee called a public meeting for Monday, August 15, at 1 p.m., in the Royal Victoria Theatre.

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THE meeting was duly held and became memorable in the political annals of Sydney for many years afterwards. The last speaker, placed in that position to make way for the big men, but nevertheless capturing the meeting, was "Little Dan Deniehy," the youngest member of the committee.

A variety of resolutions had been carried before Deniehy rose to speak. Everything was against his achieving a success at this meeting—the lateness of the hour, his size, the fact that he was comparatively unknown.

He started uncertainly and there were cries for him to speak up. But soon he had his audience listening intently, as, carefully and methodically, and with great eloquence, he analysed the proposed constitution.

Then he came to the proposed "House of Lords." His scathing comments on Wentworth and other "pigmies" who sought to establish a bunyip aristocracy won gusts of laughter, and, fin-

Lament For A Spinster

*Never shall the shade of the sheoak be over you
nor the magpie's wing in the dusk brush your hair,
only the wagtail's song chiding you,
deriding and flitting fantastically
through the echoes you once half raised.
Never the sheoak's shade over you,
never over,
only the chiding song pursuing your imperceptible
and immaculate shadow.*

—IAN MUDIE.



DENIEHY

"Blighted child of genius . . ."

ally, a tremendous outburst of enthusiasm.

As he sat down, cheer after cheer rang through the theatre.

"The audience," says one writer (Bladen), "felt unable sufficiently to exhibit their admiration of the powerful spirit that has given such a brilliant exposition of the intense feelings which had brought them together."

When another meeting was held a few weeks later, this time in the open air near Circular Quay, there were never fewer than 3,000 present—from the start of the meeting at 1.30 until long after it was too dark for the "Herald" reporter to take down the notes of Deniehy's speech!

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WENTWORTH indicated that he had felt deeply the attacks made upon him. In his second reading speech, which filled 16 closely printed columns of the "Herald," he attacked the people of Sydney, his own constituents, as "the most vacillating, ignorant and misled body of people in the colony" and he referred to the audience at the theatre meeting as vagabonds, dirty revilers, chartists, socialists, "Americans, Germans, Californians and all manner of undesirable people."

For his young opponent it was a triumph. Because of the opposition, the proposal to establish an hereditary aristocracy was withdrawn. Deniehy had given eloquent voice to that opposition and he was remembered for many years as the young orator of '53 who had helped to defeat Wentworth's proposal.

Deniehy himself, however, had but a dozen more years to live. He tried later to found a liberal

out a dozen more years to live. He tried later to found a liberal party. He was elected to Parliament, but his inability to compromise on principles lost him friends and advancement.

He was broken-hearted when four of his children died one after the other. The vice of drink that he contracted in the days of his popularity took a firmer hold of him and was finally to kill him.

He successfully edited two weekly papers—one in Sydney and one in Melbourne—but had no heart to fight against the tragic fate that seemingly was inexorably to be his. Then one day in late 1865 he fell down in a street in Bathurst and “the blighted child of genius”—as Charles Harpur spoke of him—was no more.