

Opening of Centenary of Federation  
Sir Samuel Griffith Memorabilia Display Miegunyah

Thursday 1 March 2001 7pm

The Hon P de Jersey AC - Chief Justice of Queensland

He was born about a century and a half ago in Glamorganshire, Wales. He died about three-quarters of a century later in his beloved Queensland.

Sir Samuel Walker Griffith: the third Chief Justice of Queensland, twice Premier of Queensland, Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia indeed its first.

A jurist of towering intellect and vast accomplishment: draftsman of Queensland's Criminal Code (still definitive today), substantial draftsman of the Commonwealth Constitution (also still operative and largely unchanged).

A politician with a social conscience: Griffith initiated a system of free compulsory public education; he agitated for the end of Kanaka labour on the canefields and urged the admissibility of the evidence of Aboriginal witnesses.

Here was a judge of massive achievement, leaving a rich tapestry of illuminating judgments; one of the Commonwealth's most influential founding fathers, and the person largely responsible for initially establishing the High Court as an ultimate, appellate court respected throughout the common law world. Here was a politician truly devoted to advancing the public interest.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's easy to speak heroically of Sir Samuel Griffith. (Mind you, in the current Australian climate, I trust I may be "allowed" to speak of a hero other than Sir Donald Bradman.) Yet like the patron saint of Wales, Griffith's massive achievements were not accidental. Certainly his intellectual capacity, his moral rigour and his self-confidence predisposed him to success. But that success was achieved only with like what is said of St David much additional hard work. Griffith is said to have been industrious, in fact, to the point of obsessiveness. Sir Samuel may not have relished, or shared, another of St David's renowned qualities, that is temperance; but there are, I suppose, certain climatic differences between Queensland and Wales!

It is fitting that we inaugurate this exhibition on St David's day, especially because Sir Samuel was the initial patron of the St David's Society founded here in 1919.

With the focus on the exhibition on attire, we should briefly recall the physical aspect of the man: again like what is said of St David, Griffith was tall, of

handsome countenance and commanding presence. One need gaze only for a moment upon Mr Godfrey Rivers' definitive portrait hanging in the Banco Court at the Supreme Courthouse to be persuaded of that. We are told his regalia was important to him: his dress has indeed been described as "dandified".

But clothes did not of course "make" this man. His remarkable actual achievements assured public appreciation of his true substance, and that endures today notwithstanding merely irritating nibbles by a few somewhat carping detractors.

And well established public achievement aside, we should not by the way overlook that privately, Griffith was a caring husband and father. His extant family letters betray great tenderness. A person who has left an immense public legacy; yet a person attuned to the ultimately real personal values, reflected in effective family life.

We may here through this exhibition glimpse things which were materially very close to Sir Samuel Griffith. It is frankly fascinating that we can do that; and thanks substantially to the beautiful restoration by the textile conservator, Mr Michael Mareudy.

You may be interested, ladies and gentlemen, to know that Sir Samuel Griffith's judicial successors, the current Judges of the Supreme Court of Queensland, still wear basically the same court robes as he did. The past informs the present. The people of Queensland may be reassured of the stability of their court in part by the continuity of its fine tradition.

The past informing the present – thought not, we hear, in Afghanistan, where the Taliban militia defiantly destroys ancient Buddhist statues: "all we are breaking", they say, "is stones". Memories of Alexandria, the Reformation? I am relieved that post Belleview, we do here in Queensland display renewed passion to respect and preserve our past: it is far from being a merely empty past.

I warmly congratulate the Queensland Women's Historical Association for its wonderful initiative in securing the long term preservation, and now public display, of these historically fascinating exhibits.

They include, I should add, other items of Griffith family memorabilia: the original metal trunks used to store the garments; Sir Samuel's sister, Mary Griffith's "Lady of Grace" medal; silverware, and in its own way brilliant, Sir Samuel's rather legendary translation of Dante's "Divine Comedy". He drafted our Criminal Code, substantially the Commonwealth Constitution, the Rules of the Supreme Court of Queensland, the Commonwealth Judiciary Act ). the list goes on. Yet amazingly, he also found time for drama. It may be conceded the Dante translation drew but little praise. Sir Julian Salomans, New South Wales lawyer and politician,

prominent in the Federation debate, reportedly asked Griffith to inscribe his copy, "From the author", as "he would not like anyone to think he had stolen it, still less bought it" (the Rt Hon Sir Harry Gibbs: The Inaugural Sir Samuel Walker Griffith Memorial Lecture (1984) LSJ 286 290). But how easy it is to detract from those not within our midst! Salomons, incidentally, was in 1886 appointed Chief Justice of New South Wales, but declined to be sworn in because of the hostility of the then current members of the bench.

This excellent display, following restoration of the items under the auspices of the Queensland Women's Historical Association, has been facilitated by a grant of \$18,603 from the Queensland Community Assistance Programme of the Centenary of Federation Committee (Queensland). I applaud the sterling commitment of the members of the Association to the illumination of our wonderful

Queensland Australian history: this particular exhibition cannot but intrigue and excite. I urge members of the public to experience it.

As a successor in office to Sir Samuel Walker Griffith, the Chief Justice 14 places further along the line, it is my great privilege tonight to declare this fine exhibition officially open!