



Ian Warden reflects on one community's expression of gratitude for the assistance of a dedicated politician

Australians usually struggle to say a kind word about their politicians but, in April 1904, the grateful people of Parkes presented their local federal member of parliament with a gorgeous and gushingly-worded illuminated address that sang his praises to the heavens. What had Thomas Brown, Esquire MHR done to earn this adulation?

Today's politicians, keen to do the right thing by their country constituents during the present drought (politicians and the press are urging us to think of this one as 'the worst in 100 years' and even as 'the worst since records were begun'), might like to use Thomas Brown as their role model. In 1902 and 1903, and during what may have been almost Australia's worst drought of all, the so-called 'Federation Drought' of 1895–1903, Brown seems to have done his indefatigable and brilliant best for his suffering constituents.

We will come back to Brown's feats of compassionate practicality in a moment but, to set the scene, we should take note of the special hellishness of the Federation Drought in eastern Australia.

PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE AND WISE COUNSELS

THOMAS BROWN AND THE FEDERATION DROUGHT

Droughts are notoriously frequent in Australia (some scientists think there is a significant drought somewhere in Australia in three of every four years), and different droughts and the damage they do and the misery they bring are virtually impossible to compare with one another. But we know that the Federation Drought was especially wretched, wreaking some of its worst, most heartbreaking havoc between 1901 and 1902. It inflicted losses of an estimated 37 million sheep and 4.8 million cattle in Queensland alone. Some of the low rainfall levels measured at weather stations across Queensland and New South Wales during 1901 and 1902 are still record lows for those places. Victoria, too, suffered terribly.

'In 1902, there came the Great Drought,' Sir Robert Menzies reminisced in his autobiography *Afternoon Light*. 'Our district [around Jeparit in Victoria] had 2½ inches of rain for the year, and all at the wrong time. What grass there was withered, and was blown away, so that the soil lay burnt, and pale brown, and vacant. The river receded into a series of unrelated and stagnant pools.'



left:
Swiss Studios, Melbourne
Portrait of Thomas Brown
c.1900
sepia toned photograph;
18.2 x 12.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23252160

below:
Darren Clark (b.1967)
*Dry River Bed with Fish
Skeleton, Coonamble,
New South Wales, 2002*
coloured photograph;
34.3 x 50.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3409092

The lake dried up, the sandy floor naked to the sun. All seemed lost. I was seven years old; and it remains a vivid memory.'

In his lovely evocation in *Green Mountains and Cullenbenbong* of the ending of the 1902 drought in the Jenolan district of New South Wales, Bernard O'Reilly passed on his father's belief that, even when there at last seemed to be a true promise of rain, 'still, there was a disinclination to believe, for the scourge of 1902 was not as other droughts; there was a hopelessness which had entered the hearts of the people—a feeling that rain would never fall again'.

In January 1903, *The Town and Country Journal* carried a report of the account of a distressed gentleman who had just come back from a tour of the north-western portion of New South Wales. He catalogued the awfulness he'd seen including his discovery that 'There are families who have lost their all, and owing to the price and scarcity of meat have been living on poor rabbits, wallabies, kangaroo rats and porcupines [echidnas]'. The author continued,

No mind can conceive nor pen describe, the pathetic scenes of hardship and struggles against poverty patiently and silently endured by scores of struggling settlers.

And our hero Thomas Brown, to whose story we are about to return, was not the only

federal parliamentarian to go out into the shocking countryside in 1902. On 11 February of that year, a party of senators set out on an inspection of suggested sites for the new nation's capital city.

One of them, Senator Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Neild, a wit, wrote for *The Town and Country Journal* a highly readable diary about this 'pilgrimage' by tormented parliamentarians he called 'pilgrims'. The earlier parts of his chronicle are full of references to the hellishness of the bush in drought and to what he called the 'atmospheric vileness'.

The party gathered at Albury, and 'with a temperature approximating to the Black Hole of Calcutta', Neild thought it ludicrous that their leader Sir William Lyne should wear 'a heavy frock coat and silk hat'.

Of the visit to Albury, Senator Neild reported that, in the early morning of the horrible day, they all had 'a warm and dusty time of it' and that then 'the morning progressed to a greater degree of unpleasantness as 11 o'clock was reached, when a lively duststorm enhanced the unhappiness of the pilgrims'.

'Albury does not seem to "catch on" with the pilgrims,' he recorded in his diary.

'Nice position for a federal cemetery' says one. 'Hot as a stokehole' says another; and, in view of the sirocco blowing from the west, and filling eyes, nose, ears, mouth, hair, and clothing with a surfeit of filth and covering of every object a hundred yards distant with a curtain of yellow dust, pilgrims may be forgiven if they fail to recognise Albury as the Federal Mecca ... Certainly the Fates have been unkind to Albury in providing about as disgusting a day for the Senatorial inspection as it is in the heart of man to conceive.

And so on to Wagga Wagga, where 'arriving in a tornado of dust' the pilgrims clambered into cars that had been provided to take them to Wagga's promised land of an ideal site. And then, a few miles out of town and in a month when the press was full of news of terrible blazes, Senator Neild reported 'they encountered a fierce bush fire'.

Jumping from their carriages, a number of Senators commenced to fight the flames ... Senators, notably those from Queensland and Western Australia, put in excellent work beating out the rapidly-extending flames.

E.T. Luke (1864–1938)
*The Senatorial Party at Albury
Railway Station* 1902
albumen photograph;
18.8 x 24.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24552185





champagne remains!' The cartoon 'The Shrivelled Senators' laughed at the way in which the senators found Albury so hot they feared that they might have accidentally strayed down into the fiery furnaces of Hell.

And it was in this context of parched eastern Australia during the atmospheric vileness of the Federation Drought at its worst that Thomas Brown earned his beautiful illuminated address.

Created by John Sands of Sydney and commissioned

left:
E.T. Luke (1864–1938)
Senators Bathing in the Snowy River at Dalgety 1902
albumen photograph;
18.6 x 24.1 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24587182

below left:
Unknown artist
The Lost Capital Seekers
reproduced from *Punch*,
13 February 1902
Newspapers Collection, NX 104

below right:
Unknown artist
The Shrivelled Senators
reproduced from *Punch*,
27 February 1902
Newspapers Collection, NX 104

The Town and Country Journal, enjoying the delicious schadenfreude of the thought of these tall poppies suffering some hardships, published two cartoons on the subject during the pilgrimage. 'The Lost Capital Seekers' showed despairing senators arranged in a desolate and bone-strewn landscape and lamenting 'Death is staring us in the face. Only two days' supply of

by William Metcalfe, the mayor of Parkes, and other local luminaries, it is one of the discreet treasures of the National Library of Australia and is in immaculate and lovely condition.

Within the surrounds of a picturesque scene, the skilled calligrapher has set the testimony that 'Feelings of the deepest gratitude impel us, on behalf of the





Illuminated Address Presented to Thomas Brown by the Citizens Committee of Parkes 1904
Manuscript Collection, MS 2162

farmers and settlers and allied industries in this district, to convey our thanks for the untiring zeal manifested by you, in laboriously traversing the famine stricken portions of this state during the period 1902-3 ... and subsequently, per the medium of the press, causing the government and people to realise the gravity of the situation a year ago'.

The hymn of praise goes on to give Brown credit for, among other things, negotiating with the Railway Commissioner to radically reduce the costs of transporting impoverished farmers' grain and fodder and getting the Lord Mayor of Sydney to establish his Drought Relief Fund.

Things had become so terrible, the statement remembers, that farmers had been 'practically in the bankruptcy court'. Now, though, those farmers who had teetered on the brink of bankruptcy 'have been enabled

to meet their engagements' and so, enabled to go on farming, had just been able to garner a bumper harvest of 'an average of 15 bushels to the acre ... yielding the large monetary return of £125 per family of five'.

[All] this under the blessing of God, we feel in a large measure due to your practical assistance and wise counsels.

We trust that you may be long spared in health and strength to carry on the noble work in which you are engaged, and to enjoy the esteem of an ever increasing number of your fellow citizens.

The gushing testimony, a masterpiece of the calligraphers' art, is set within the surrounds of a picturesque scene of a bountiful harvest of golden wheat being gathered in at some agrarian Parkesian paradise. It is an antipodean Eden. Bright green trees line what is surely a full and babbling creek. There is the classic Australian blue horizon and perhaps best of all, in a sky of a comfortingly pale blue (not the belligerent sapphire of the sky on baking hot days) there are floating some of the kinds of promisingly plump and fluffy clouds not seen

during those long and desperate months when the atmosphere had been vile.

It seems a shame that the illuminated address is out of fashion now. Is it time to bring it back? During the present drought there are surely local members manifesting untiring zeal and after it there will surely be constituents who want to express feelings of deepest gratitude to these parliamentary heroes and heroines. The 'thank you' e-mail will be nice but will lack some of the formal grace of the work of art presented to Thomas Brown for his practical assistance and wise counsels.

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