

# *His Excellency* SIR GERALD STRICKLAND COUNT DELLA CATENA KCMG, BA, LLB



Barry York delves into the life of controversial Maltese nobleman Sir Gerald Strickland, governor of three Australian states and Prime Minister of Malta

**S**ir Gerald Strickland was a remarkable figure among Australia's state governors. Between 1904 and 1917, he was governor of three Australian states, and only the third Catholic to be appointed to the position. In 1924, he was elected to the British House of Commons, becoming a peer in 1928. In 1927, he became Prime Minister of Malta, dying there on 22 August 1940.

His public career was marked by controversy. In 1917, he was recalled from the governorship of New South Wales by the British Colonial Office and in 1930 the Catholic Church in Malta made it a mortal sin to vote for him.

The reasons behind his New South Wales recall are complicated but arose because Strickland believed he had the power as governor to refuse assent to a Bill extending

the life of the parliament. He thought that the government should face the electors over the question; however, the Colonial Office forced him to assent to the Bill.

Strickland could be pugnacious and lacking in tact but, according to G.P. Walsh in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online*, he was also 'a genial host and brilliant conversationalist'. He was also striking in appearance, being in possession of a thick moustache.

Born at Valletta, Malta, on 24 May 1861, to a British naval officer father and a Maltese mother of noble background, Strickland was active in Maltese politics and was elected to its Council of Government in 1887. He was Malta's Principal Government Secretary from 1888 until 1902, when he became governor of the Leeward Islands. After this post, he served as governor of Tasmania (1904–1909), Western Australia (1909–1912) and New South Wales (1912–1917).

Elected to Malta's Legislative Assembly in 1921, he formed the Anglo-Maltese Party, which later became the Constitutional Party. His period as prime minister was possible because of an alliance with the Malta Labour

above:  
Perth City Council  
Illuminated farewell address presented to Sir Gerald Strickland, 1913  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 4502

below:  
Unknown photographer  
Portrait of Gerald Strickland, 1910 (detail)  
reproduced from *Album 1910–1911* by M.B. Selby-Smyth  
Manuscripts Collection  
MS 4830





Strickland. This can be explained in part by the fact that emigration was a controversial political issue in Malta and those who migrated to Australia were more likely to sympathise with Strickland's pro-emigration political party.

My father, Loreto, who was born in Malta in 1918, was interviewed in 1989. He recalled how the nuns at the school he attended used to teach the children that Strickland was a freemason and that, like other freemasons, he grew a forked tail and wings at night and flew in the sky. My father also recalled how the priests refused to bless the house of his father, Salvatore Meilak, because Salvatore was known to be a supporter of Strickland's party.

Interviewee Manwel Nicholas-Borg, who migrated to Melbourne in 1949, had worked in Malta for Strickland's newspapers, *Il-Berqa* and the *Times of Malta*. He described Strickland as a very shrewd and controversial person, who:

was always advocating people to come to Australia especially those that were keen on farming, on sugarcane farming especially. But he also advocated people to come to Australia because he was always an advocate of the English language. In Malta around that time, there was a battle between some politicians who wanted to have the Italian language taking precedence over English and Strickland wanted English to be the number one language in Malta. So he always encouraged people to come to an English-speaking country.

It should be noted that Strickland also promoted the Maltese language and is credited with elevating it from the kitchen to the law courts, with Maltese and English replacing Italian as the official language of the courts in 1934.

After Strickland's death in 1940, his daughter Mabel continued her father's newspapers. Nicholas-Borg remembers how:

During 1942 when the blitz [the intense bombing of Malta by the Germans and Italians] was in its fullest activities, Miss Mabel Strickland used to pay us five shillings extra for every air-raid during the night that we kept on printing the paper because it was a record that the paper, air-raids or no air-raids, was always published. As a matter of irony, one day she stopped paying us for air-raids and the air-raids stopped. I remember that very clearly.

Party, which identified with his reformist and anti-fascist politics. Strickland once described himself as a British imperialist of Maltese birth. He was, I think, a progressive conservative.

The Library's Oral History Collection has many interviews with Maltese migrants who were in Malta during the Strickland era of the 1920s and 1930s. These people usually had a favourable opinion of



including Strickland and his family with dignitaries, and scenes of landscapes and buildings—but also many amateur snapshots, possibly taken by Selby-Smyth. There are three snaps of an 'Aboriginal man spear throwing at Norseman, WA' in 1910. Another is captioned 'first aeroplane in Australia' and is dated 9 January 1911. Whether it is the very first or not, the photo shows a flimsy-looking flying machine in the air. Another snap shows 'native prisoners cutting down trees' at Rottnest, and

another reveals a Dorrit-like 'telegraph boy on horseback' out in the bush. Other photographs portray Strickland as an energetic individual keen to 'get among it'. For example, he is photographed chopping into a tree at the Lakeside Wood Company and with miners at the bottom of Kalgoorlie's Great Boulder mine. In addition to the cuttings and photos, there are cartoons, programs and menus.

Captain Selby-Smyth's album was received by the Library's liaison officer in London, Barbara Perry, from a member of his

family. A letter dated 10 April 1974 from National Librarian George Chandler to Mabel Strickland mentioned the arrival of the albums. Strickland replied on 30 April 1974 saying:

I am most excited about what you told me about Captain Selby-Smyth's album of photographs. He was one of Lord Strickland's ADCs [aides-de-camp] in Western Australia and married to one of my mother's cousins. Unhappily he died in the 1914–18 war. He was a great favourite in the school-room.

Strickland's legacy is generally seen in a positive light in Malta today but not many Australians know about the Maltese nobleman—the Count della Catena—who was once the governor of three Australian states. G.P. Walsh is probably right when he concludes about Gerald Strickland that:

The combination of his English and Maltese inheritance accounted for the strength of his dual patriotism, but it brought out a pugnacity which often antagonized would-be sympathizers and obscured the worth of his policies.

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above:  
Unknown photographer  
'Lady Edeline and His Excellency'  
dressed for the Government  
House childrens' fancy dress ball  
to celebrate the coronation of  
King George V, 24 June 1911  
reproduced from *Album 1910–  
1911* by M.B. Selby-Smyth  
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below right:  
Unknown photographer  
'At the Bottom of the Great  
Boulder Mine (2600 ft)'  
(Strickland seated, second from  
right)  
reproduced from *Album 1910–  
1911* by M.B. Selby-Smyth  
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