



▲ Image 1: The headstone at the grave site of George Williams Lee (1831-1864). Plan 3, Section I, Allotment 28, Sale Public Cemetery, Victoria. Note: details on the headstone differ slightly to those on the death certificate. Image from the author's collection.

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.<sup>16</sup> This was 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 25 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'.<sup>17</sup>

Two other nominees for the 'liberal causes' (factions rather than political parties being the order of the day) Mr. W.F. **Parker**<sup>18</sup> and Dr. George **Mackay**<sup>19</sup>, a lawyer, were requisitioned.

Public meetings in the district ensued. **GWL** was introduced as a phrenologist<sup>20</sup>, 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', **GWL** 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'.<sup>21</sup>

At one meeting, a dispute broke out between Mr. **Parker** and **GWL**: 'they were like a couple of cubs growling at each other'<sup>22</sup>. **GWL** found it necessary to write a *Letter to the Editor* of *The Gippsland Times* refuting the 'gratuitous slanders' proposed by a Mr **Anderson**<sup>23</sup>, 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**'.<sup>24</sup> Mr **Parker** retired from the candidature. No reason was given.

The *Gippsland Guardian* described **GWL** as 'a very argumentative gentleman', 'Mephistophilean (sic)', adding, 'intellect he has given no evidence of possessing and the letter 'h' he utterly ignores'.<sup>25</sup> As to his lack of intellect, evidence from King's College refutes this as 'amongst the list of those presented prizes at the Public Distribution, on the 29 June, 1849, by His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury' was George Williams **Lee** for Third Year Divinity, Arts of Construction, and Chemical Manipulation'.<sup>26</sup>

**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?' 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'.<sup>27</sup> The people enjoyed the speeches and his desire for *Australia Felix, Australia Happy*.

However, **GWL** retired from the candidature on the 14 October 1861 at the request of the Land League in favour of Dr **Mackay**.<sup>28</sup> No reason was given. Dr **Mackay** said **GWL** was 'a gentleman' for stepping aside.<sup>29</sup> 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