

George Lee, Pompous Git or Good Bloke?

by Margaret Coghlan

Most of us would like to believe that our colonial forebears were 'good people' – genuine contributors to a developing colony or at least lovable rogues. And in my own case this does appear to be true. However, there is one forebear, a great great uncle named George Williams **Lee**, who makes me nervous ...

In September 1861, a correspondent for the Victorian newspaper the *Gippsland Guardian* gave an account of a speech given by George Williams **Lee** to the people of Sale. George was on the electioneering trail as a nominee for the candidature for the seat of North Gippsland in the Legislative Assembly of Victoria. The correspondent blasted him, calling him 'Judas Iscariot' and 'the fetid refuse of the Eastern Market'.¹ The vitriol made for disturbing reading. Was he a 'good bloke' or a foolish one full of his own self-importance?

George Williams **Lee** was a previously unknown member of my immigrant story. He appeared on my radar during the search for my great grandfather, Edward **Lee**, a wood engraver.²

Edward **Lee** arrived in Melbourne in 1863, as a 23 year old 'trader'. He trained as a wood engraver in England and was employed by the colonial illustrated newspapers of early Melbourne. The 1851 English census for the parish of Newington, County Surrey shows Edward living with his parents, a servant and four siblings, the eldest sibling being George Williams **Lee**. Profession – 'AKC' (Associate, King's College, London), 'Builder'. A will/probate search through the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) website for Edward was unsuccessful but the details in probate papers found for a George Williams **Lee**, confirmed he was in fact, Edward's brother.³

George Williams **Lee** (from now on referred to as **GWL**) arrived in Port Phillip on the 2 December 1852, eleven years prior to his brother Edward. He is described as a 21 year old 'gold seeker'.⁴ Letters written 'home' to England by George **Morton** who shared a cabin with **GWL** on the *Blackwall* revealed that they walked to the gold

diggings of Forest Creek, near Castlemaine, shortly after their arrival. Life was hard and George **Morton** lamented '... to make money and then return to dear old England is the business of our lives'.⁵ By March 1853 they were back in Melbourne.

In September 1853, **GWL** built a house in Fitzroy Melbourne⁶ and a few months later he placed an advertisement in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, selling a selection of books on metallurgy, architecture, the steam engine, surveying, mining and drawing instruments.⁷ A not surprising collection considering his education. Had he given up on gold-mining?

A search for **GWL** on *Trove*, the searchable website for Australian digitized newspapers, produced many 'hits' in the Melbourne newspapers of the 1850s. He was 'secretary' for the National Land League⁸, the Eight Hours Movement⁹, the Newspaper Company¹⁰ and the People's Club – a place where 'newly arrived immigrants can obtain advice, free of cost'; 'a digger's protection' and 'a progressive centre for the people'¹¹. He wrote a *Letter to the Editor* of *The Argus* questioning the use of expensive iron on the railways when there wasn't enough money to make them safely.¹² He was involved in public meetings at the Eastern Market¹³ – a place where people gathered for the entertainment of political jousting and a site over a hundred years later where a crowd of screaming teenagers would gather to catch a glimpse of the Beatles at the Southern Cross Hotel. A dramatic change in a society's idea of entertainment.

In early September 1861, it was reported that the newly elected member for North Gippsland, John **Everard**, was ineligible to take up the position as he was pronounced insolvent – on the day he was elected!¹⁴ A new election was called.

On the 11 September 1861, a requisition to stand was made to **GWL** by some of the constituents of North Gippsland.¹⁵ **GWL**, now over thirty years old – a prerequisite to serving as a Member of the Legislative Assembly – accepted. ▶▶

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