

## WALTER H. COOPER

Walter H. Cooper started his professional career as a journalist during the late 1860s, and in 1868 wrote one of his most acclaimed dramas, *Colonial Experience*. His other works from this period included the pantomimes, *The History of Kodadad and His Brothers* (1866) and *Harlequin Little Jack Horner* (1868), along with several sensation dramas, notably *Sun and Shadow* (1870), and at least one farce. Cooper's last few years were filled with turmoil and controversy which may well have contributed to his early death in 1880.

The first Australian writer of sensation drama, ahead of George Darrell and Alfred Dampier, Walter Hampson Cooper was born at Liverpool, west of Sydney on 6 July 1842. The son of Joshua Cooper and his wife Anne Jane Drummond (née Thompson), he worked at a variety of occupations in his short life, and also unsuccessfully attempted entering politics on two occasions. An outstanding shorthand writer, he his early career saw him employed as a journalist with the *Queensland Guardian*. In 1866 Cooper took up a position as parliamentary reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* before joining the *Argus* for a short period. He returned to the *Herald* in 1871.

In the late 1860s Cooper turned his hand to writing for the stage. Arguably his most successful play, the melodrama, *Colonial Experience*, was produced in 1868. Some of the other theatre works Cooper wrote and which were staged during the 1860s and early 1870s include: two pantomimes, *The History of Kodadad and His Brothers* (1866) and *Harlequin Little Jack Horner* (1868); a farce titled *The New Crime; Or, 'Andsome 'Enery's Mare's Nest* (1868); the sensation dramas *Sun and Shadow* (1870), *Foiled* (1871), *Hazard; Or, Pearce Dyceton's Crime* (1872); and the tragedy, *Rugantino the Ruthless* (1872).

Cooper's interest in politics led to his acquaintance with Henry Parkes, and in 1872 he found himself acting as the politician's agent in both the Tamworth and Liverpool Plains electorates. The following year he was appointed secretary to the Public Charities Commission. Cooper's desire to enter politics was thwarted soon afterwards, however, when his exuberance and forthright opinions put him offside with a number of sitting members. Although dissuaded by Parkes from contesting a seat in East Sydney during the 1874 elections, he nevertheless made a failed attempt in the Lower Hunter region. Despite this setback, Cooper continued to make important contributions to political debates over the next few years through his insightful analyses - published in both newspapers and private pamphlets. In 1874 he travelled to America hoping to have his plays produced there.

When this did not eventuate he returned to Australia and set his sights on entering the legal profession. Supported financially by Parkes, he was admitted to the bar in 1875 but found himself in dire financial straits for sometime afterwards, unable even to repay his benefactor. Not surprisingly his relationship with Parkes deteriorated as a result. Although managing to maintain his political momentum by becoming vice-president of the protectionist Political Reform League and a leading activist in the anti-Chinese agitation movement, within a few years his tangled domestic affairs had begun to impose a strain on both his career and personal judgment.

By 1877 Cooper had managed to pay some of his debts off but his decision two years later to leave his wife led to a bitter family dispute. At one point a fight ensued between him and his brother-in-law. The *Evening News* (15 February 1879, n. pag.) described the scuffle that eventuated, reporting that a gun had been fired. Although Cooper was not injured, the woman with whom he was having an affair was apparently grazed in the arm. Cooper shortly afterwards assaulted J. H. Heaton, which led to his own arrest and a £10 fine and bond. With his personal situation on a downward spiral Cooper found himself destitute within a year, and was forced to sell his possessions, including all his books. Writing to Parkes for help, he indicated that his life had been a bitter struggle against adversity all the more potent "because my own hand guided its weapons and poverty, humiliation and friendlessness were my companions" (qtd Bede Nairn, 455). Walter Cooper died shortly afterwards at Point Piper on 26 July 1880 from a combination of heart disease, haemorrhage and exhaustion. An obituary published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* two days later suggested that he lacked the personal qualities that would have enabled his undoubted brilliance to shine consistently. His body is interred at the Waverly Cemetery. His headstone identifies him as a "Barrister-at-Law."

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**FRAULEIN FANNY, and the LEOPOLD BROTHERS.**

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Columbine.....	Fraulein FANNIE
Pantaloon.....	Mr. G. LEOPOLD
Clown.....	Mr. T. LEOPOLD
Juvenile Clown, &c., &c.....	ALBERT LEOPOLD
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N.B.—This Ballet takes place in a most picturesque and fairy-like scene, painted expressly by Mr. A. Torning, called the

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The Dresses of the Fairies will represent our Christmas and National Emblems, including the Holly, Ivy, Mistletoe, the Rose, the Shamrock and the Thistle, Australian Wild Flowers, &c., the whole forming a most beautiful and elegant picture, in fact a

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The vocal music of the opening will include several of the new airs now so popular in London, including the *Sword Song from the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, *Pal O'Mine*, *Un Ballo*, *Vivacino*, *Orpheus Galop*, *Rigolotto*, *Nigger Breakdowns*, *New Medley Overture*, &c.

**NEW LOCAL SONG, BY LITTLE JACK HORNER.**

*Sydney Morning Herald* 24 Dec. (1868), 8.

Cooper left behind his wife, Ellen, and his six children (five sons and one daughter). One of his last plays to be staged during his life, *Fuss; Or, A Tale of the Exhibition*, is believed to have been written a year or two previously. Staged at the Victoria Theatre (Syd) in April 1880, this three act comedy shows Cooper's insight into human psychology at its best, as he delineates the characteristics of the various nationalities represented at the International Exhibition.

### **MUSIC THEATRE WORKS**

**1866:** **The History of Kodadad and His Brothers** [pantomime]

**1868:** **Harlequin Little Jack Horner** [pantomime]

### **FURTHER REFERENCE**

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