



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PAPER No. 99

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DATE: 23 September 2003

RT. WOR. BRO. SIR LESLIE JAMES HERRON (1902-1973)

Sir Leslie James Herron was born on 22 May 1902 at Mosman, Sydney, second of six children of native-born parents, Henry Herron, an insurance clerk, and his wife, Emily Ethel, nee Downie.

Leslie was educated at the Church of England Preparatory School at Mosman, Sydney Grammar School and the University of Sydney. (LLB. 1924). He obtained second-class honours despite being an enthusiastic athlete, oarsman and footballer, playing first grade Rugby Union as a breakaway for Western Suburbs from 1922 to 1925.

Admitted to the Bar on 28 August 1925, he read with R.G. Bonney and built up a successful practice, mainly in common law, on the Northern Circuit. He spoke to Juries "in a down to earth manner which they could understand" and in consequence, "snatched innumerable verdicts."

At St James Anglican Church, Sydney, on 6 January 1930, he married Andree Lorna, daughter of Frank Leverrier K.C., and they lived at Wollstonecraft until building a house at Castle Cove in 1960. Taking up golf, he played off a handicap of nine at his best, and was President of the Australian Golf Club from 1944 to 1973.

Herron was appointed an acting District Court Judge in February 1939 and took silk on 20 December that year. Elevated to the Supreme Court on 10 February 1941, he sat mainly on criminal and civil cases attempting "to keep the balance between wartime needs of the Executive and the rights of the individual."

He received a death threat in December 1948 after having sentenced Charles Ivan Le Gallien to life imprisonment for patricide. Given police protection, Herron played golf with his bodyguard. In 1958, he served as a Royal Commissioner inquiring into the Auditor-General's statements concerning Abram Landa, the Minister for Housing.

Devoting time to the administration of sport, Leslie Herron was Chairman, from 1933-1939, and President from 1943 to 1956, of the New South Wales Rugby Union. He was foundation Chairman in 1948 of the Australian Rugby Union and he chaired the International Rugby Football Board in London in 1957. He was also President of Sydney Grammar School Old Boys Union from 1948 to 1950 and the President of the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association from 1949 to 1964. He was also a member of the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust where he served as Chairman from 1970 to 1972.

As Senior Puisne Judge, Herron was acting Chief Justice from March 1962 during the illness of Dr H.V. Evatt and was confirmed in Office on 25 October that year. Although he was no great Jurist, he brought to his Office "a robust common sense in the enunciation of principles and a broad humanity of approach." He claimed that "long and intimate experience with the daily work of the court, and my various activities in life, may have endowed me with that even greater quality of a Judge, namely sound judgement." At the Bar he had eschewed appellate work and as Chief Justice did not relish it, but presided over the Full Court with great authority.

In administering the business of a rapidly expanding judicature, Herron sought to prevent delays and was grieved that "litigation resulting from death or bodily injury by motor vehicles had tended to overwhelm the court." He was an energetic Chairman, from November 1962, of the Law Reform Committee and many of its recommendations were adopted by the Law Reform Commission and embodied in the far-reaching Supreme Court Act of 1970 which "directed the fusion of Law and Equity" in attempt to make litigation "just, quick and cheap". Upheld by his Christian Faith, Herron conducted his Court with consideration, dignity and mercy, especially towards unrepresented appellants. He found the Chief Justices garden at the Supreme Court a retreat where he could ponder over cases or practice his golf swing or putting.

Leslie Herron headed appeals for St Vincent's Hospital, the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, the National Heart Foundation, the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, the Central Methodist Mission, the Salvation Army and the Bush Children's Hostel Foundation of New South Wales. As President of the State Branch of the St John's Ambulance Association, he was appointed a Knight of the Order of St John in 1964. He was named 'Father of the Year' and made an Honorary Citizen of Grafton in 1963.

He was appointed C.M.G. in 1964 and K.B.E. in 1966 and received an honorary L.L.D. in 1972 from the University of New South Wales.

Herron was described as "a splendid companion, interested and interesting, with a lively sense of humour." He was a member of the Australian Jockey Club and the Royal Automobile Club. He loved veteran cars and travelling in trains and he surfed regularly in summer. Known to his bowling mates as 'Chook', he belonged to the City and the Northbridge Bowling Clubs. He was also a member of the Dead End Kids Bowling Club which raised money for charity.

He was a big man with a commanding presence and a strong personality - six feet (183 cm) tall, weighing over fourteen stone (90 kg), with thick white hair.

In an occasional address, later broadcast, he condemned, as a lawyer, the trial of Jesus as a "legal travesty leading to judicial murder, swift and pitiless."

On reaching what he described as 'the age of statutory senility,' Sir Leslie retired in May 1972 and began work on a scheme for free legal aid. He had been appointed Lieutenant Governor in April 1972 and was administering the Government when he died of acute leukaemia on 3 May 1973 in St Vincent's Hospital at Darlinghurst.

He was accorded a State Funeral and was cremated with Presbyterian forms. His wife and daughter survived him. A portrait of Sir Leslie Herron by Graeme Inson is held by the Supreme Court, another by H.A. Hanke is in the University of Sydney and two by Esme Bell are held by the Australian Golf Club and the Herron family.

Leslie James Herron was made a mason on 2 August 1933 in The Australian Lodge of Harmony No, 5, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales. He was passed Fellowcraft on 7 February 1934 and raised a Master Mason on 4 April 1934. He called off from this Lodge on 6 October 1945.

He affiliated with Lodge Rugby No. 875 on 16 January 1957 and called off on 20 March 1968.

He affiliated with Lodge Royal Empire No. 613 on 20 August 1964, became Senior Warden in 22 October 1964 and was installed as Worshipful Master on 24 March 1966. He also affiliated with The Old Sydneys Lodge on 8 September 1972 and remained a member of both these lodges until his death.

He had the rank of Past Junior Grand Warden conferred on 10 September 1969.

Acknowledgements:

Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 14., pp 441/442.
Ed. John Ritchie. Contributed by Martha Rutledge.
