



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

RECEIVED  
10 FEB 2004  
BY: .....

PAPER NO. 105

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY: G.H. CUMMING

DATE: 19 January 2004

**Bro. SIR DAVIS HUGHES Kt.  
(1910 - 2003)**

Sir Davis Hughes, best remembered as the politician who clashed with Danish architect Joern Utzon, was born at Sheffield, Tasmania, the eldest of seven children in a devout Baptist family.

He later lived with his grandmother so that he could attend Launceston High School. He enjoyed sport and was cox of the school four, played cricket and Australian Rules football and proudly boasted that he played with the legendary Roy "Up there" Cazaly.

He was forced to give up surfing at age 71 after being temporarily paralysed and in hospital for eight weeks after a severe dumping. He also took a keen interest in horse racing and was still studying the form of runners in Sydney and Melbourne the day before he died.

After leaving school, Hughes attended Teachers' College in Tasmania and introduced problem-based, student focused learning at Devonport High School in the 1930's, thirty years before it was begun in NSW schools.

When the Second World War began, he joined the RAAF education service where he taught psychology. He was discharged in 1945 with the rank of squadron leader and established a visual education business selling projectors and films Australia-wide.

In 1947, he accepted a teaching position at Armidale School in NSW.

Hughes took an interest in politics and, in 1950, he won the NSW seat of Armidale for the Country Party (later the National Party). He was Party Leader for a brief period at the end of the 1950's.

In May 1965, the Labor government in NSW was defeated by the Liberal-Country Party coalition with Bro. Robin (later Sir Robert) Askin as Premier. Davis Hughes was appointed Minister for Public Works.

His portfolios included the construction of the Sydney Opera House.

The Opera House affair began in 1954 when the Joe Cahill Labor government decided to build a music centre on the site of the disused Fort Macquarie tram depot at Bennelong Point.

The next step was an international architectural competition for an Opera House (actually a concert hall which could also be used for opera and a multi-purpose hall).

The winner, from 222 entries, announced in early 1957, was 38 year old Joern Utzon.

His winning entry, which comprised a series of conceptual sketches, was revolutionary, highly controversial and it broke most of the competition rules.

The population of Sydney, everyone a "grandstand architect", immediately took sides. Like the later Masonic Centre, you either thought it was marvellous or you hated it. There was no middle ground.

Work began on the foundations in 1959 before the super-structure and roof 'sails' had been designed.

Cost escalation was enormous. From the original £3.6 million in 1957, the cost was estimated at £48.4 million in 1965. Ove Arup and Partners, the Danish firm of consulting engineers said, in plain English, that the roof shape proposed by Utzon could not be built.

Davis Hughes considered it was time for action and he requested a complete set of drawings and accurate cost estimates, neither of which existed even though work had been proceeding on the project for six years!

In a letter written by Utzon to Hughes on 12 July 1965, he said "I should be in complete control of every detail." Hughes replied on 25 August: "Your wish to build the 'perfect' Opera House is understood, but it must be accepted that all such proposals must be considered in relation to cost."

Hughes suggested that Utzon's sketches for the interior failed to recognise the need for proper acoustics and did not address the proposal for seating capacity.

It was the classic conflict between the idealist and the pragmatist.

In March 1966, Utzon resigned and returned to Denmark.

Hughes offered to re-employ him as architect, responsible only for design. Utzon declined and the project was completed by a panel of architects headed by Peter Hall.

Once again the "grandstand architects" were out in force. Some supported Utzon, others supported Hughes but, as Utzon later said: "Hughes could have pulled it down if he wanted to. You can be grateful he finished it."

In later years the two men were reconciled and Utzon sent a gracious message to Lady Hughes at Sir Davis's death in 2003.

In 2002, the NSW Government announced that Utzon would oversee a major refurbishment to which Hughes responded, "Why can't we get a competent Sydney architect?"

Hughes other achievements as Minister for Public Works tend to be forgotten. He reversed the spending within his department from 60% city and 40% country.

There were major undertakings in water supplies and sewerage works, swimming pools and bridges.

After leaving parliament, Hughes was New South Wales Agent General in London for five years from 1973 and, on his return to Australia, he was knighted in 1975.

He became a director with the French Bank, Societe Generale.

Sir Davis Hughes was survived by Phillipa, Lady Hughes, daughters Susan and Parampara and son Michael.

Bro. Sir Davis Hughes was made a mason at Armidale NSW on 2 August 1951 in Lodge Unity No. 6 on the register of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. He was passed Fellowcraft on 3 January 1952 and raised a Master Mason on 5 March 1953. He called off on 7 November 1974.

---

REFERENCES:

Michael Baume

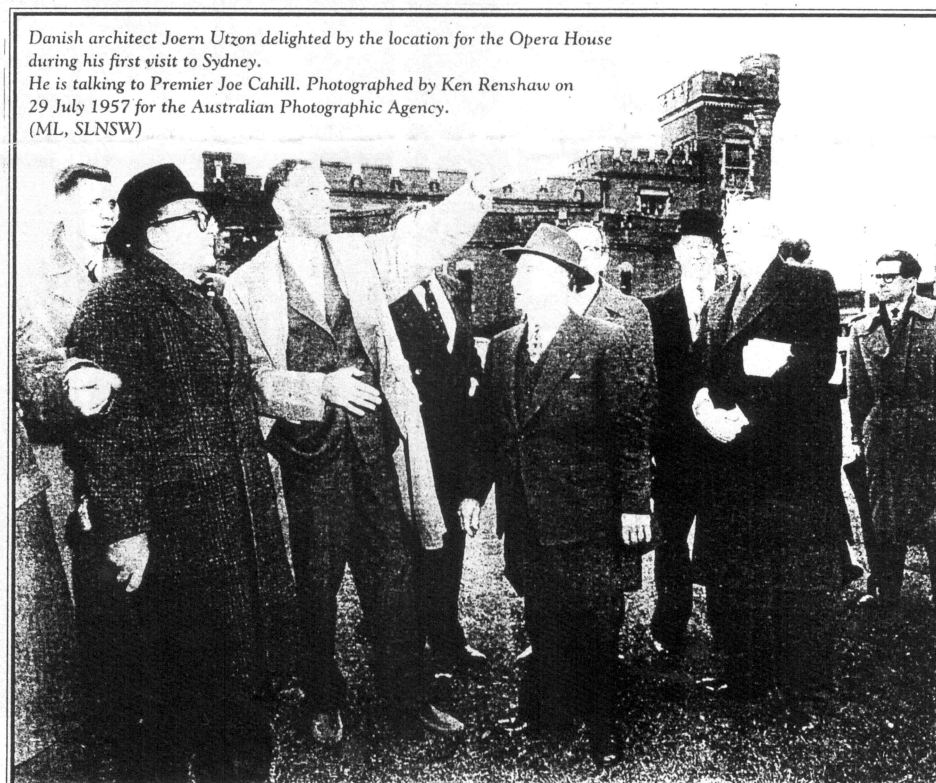
*The Sydney Opera House Affair.*  
Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., Sydney, 1967.

Suzy Baldwin [Ed]

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2003.

*The NSW Freemason*, August 1970.

Membership records of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.



On 20 October 1973, 15 000 invited guests, 2 000 small craft and the Queen withstood 70 kilometre an hour winds which quickly carried off 60 000 balloons. When the red streamers at the front of the building parted, the Opera House was officially 'launched'. Ben Blakeney, an Aboriginal actor, played a didgeridoo from the roof of the Concert Hall in memory of Bennelong and his people. Photographed by Jack Hickson, the Australian Photographic Agency. (SLNSW)

