



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PAPER No. 120

PREPARED BY: G.H. CUMMING

DATE: 25 JULY 2005

JOHN THOMAS LEY

A MURDERER IN OUR MIDST

The Australian Dictionary of Biography describes J.T. Ley as a 'politician and murderer' and *The Australian Encyclopedia* identifies him, perhaps more politically, as a 'politician and criminal!'

John Thomas Ley was born on the 28 October 1880 at Bath in the County of Somerset in southern England.

His father, employed as a butler, died in 1882 and, four years later, his mother migrated to Australia with her mother and her four children.

They settled in Sydney where young John earned money as a paper-boy and messenger.

He attended Crown Street Public School but left when he was 10 to help his mother in a grocery store she had bought. He later found work on a farm at Windsor and, with an ambition to become a lawyer, he studied shorthand at night and eventually gained employment as a junior clerk-stenographer in a Sydney solicitor's office.

In 1896, Ley joined the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts where he developed considerable debating skills.

In 1898, he married Emily Vernon, daughter of a wealthy doctor. They lived with the widowed Mrs Vernon at Glebe and had three sons.

In 1901 he transferred to Norton, Smith and Co. and was articled in 1906.

The following year, Ley and his family moved to Hurstville and, just five months later he was elected to the local council. He was involved in local issues and, as an advocate for prohibition, he earned the nickname 'Lemonade Ley.'

After losing several elections for mayor, Ley decided to become involved in State politics.

Meanwhile, he had been admitted as a solicitor on 13 March 1914.

He strongly supported conscription and, in March 1917, He was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for the seat of Hurstville for the National Party.

He joined the breakaway Progressive Party (later Country Party) and, in 1920, won

the seat of St. George for the Progressives.

After Bro. Sir George Fuller's disastrous 'seven-hour' ministry in December 1921, the Progressives were accepted back into the National Party and John Thomas Ley became Minister for Justice in Bro. Fuller's government of 1922-25.

Ley's ministry was dogged by controversy and, although in Opposition, he resigned in September 1925 to stand for the Federal seat of Barton.

This could be said to be the beginning of the end for J.T. Ley.

His Labor Party Opponent, Frederick McDonald alleged that Ley had tried to bribe him to withdraw his nomination. Ley won the seat and McDonald, who sought to involve the Court of Disputed Returns, was on his way to meet NSW Premier Jack Lang, when he mysteriously disappeared.

Ley established his own legal firm of Ley, Andrews and Co. and he was involved in business ventures such as S.O.S. Prickly Pear Poisons Ltd and Australasian Oil Fields Ltd. By 1927, allegations concerning irregularities were rife.

Despite this, Ley visited Switzerland in 1927 as a delegate to the League of Nations General Assembly in Geneva.

His critics included his legal partner, Harry Andrews and politician Hyman Goldstein.

On 3 September 1928, Goldstein was found dead at the foot of the cliffs at Coogee.

Kenneth Greedon, another associate of Ley, also died. He was last seen on a coastal steamer bound for Newcastle, NSW.

It was rumoured that Ley was involved in both cases.

He was defeated in the 1928 Federal elections and he left for England with his mistress since 1922, Maggie Brook. He became involved in various scams including the Black Market during the Second World War.

In November 1946, the body of John Bain Mudie was found in a chalkpit in Surrey.

Mudie was a barman who Ley deludedly believed was Maggie Brook's lover.

Ley and Lawrence John Smith were charged with Mudie's murder and in March 1947, Ley was convicted and sentenced to death for arranging the murder.

Three days before the former Minister of Justice was to hang, his sentence was commuted and he was committed to the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum in Berkshire where he died a few months later on 24 July 1947.

He left his estate in NSW valued at £744 to his wife and sons.

I suppose when you think of the millions of Freemasons world-wide, there has to be some to whom the Masonic principles of morality and virtue have little or no meaning. Their membership usually doesn't last long.

Bro. the Hon. John Thomas Ley was made a mason at Hurstville on 13 September 1921 in Lodge Carlton No. 382. He was passed Fellowcraft on 20 November 1921 and raised a Master Mason on 24 January 1922.

He was a foundation member of the Millions Lodge No. 476 at its consecration on 13 April 1923.

He was struck off from both lodges for non-payment of dues in November 1931, three years after he had left for England.
