

**JOHN MURTAGH MACROSSAN
FORGOTTEN MAN OF FEDERATION**

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As project manager for the Nudgee College Old Boys' Association, I gave a talk. During this I observed that one of our Centenary of Federation projects is to research and, if possible, to clarify the intriguing mystery surrounding a remarkable political figure in Queensland's pioneer past: an Irish Catholic immigrant, a miner, elected to Parliament from North Queensland under somewhat extraordinary circumstances, an MLA who became Colonial Secretary and attended Federal Councils. I refer to John Murtagh Macrossan, the "forgotten man of Federation".

The pre-Federation era was a time of great challenges which, while they can make great statesmen, can also be their undoing. In Macrossan's case he wasn't so much undone as made ill through overwork. His premature death, while at the 1891 Constitutional Convention in Sydney, robbed Queensland and Australia of a "statesman" which is a word I use after Harrison Bryant, who is considered an authority on the subject. Bryant delivered a very detailed paper on Macrossan in the *John Murtagh Macrossan Memorial Lecture* at the T. C. Beirne School of Law at The University of Queensland in the early 1950s. One newspaper editor in a moment of inspiration wrote Macrossan's epitaph ... *first martyr to Federation*.

I have been closely involved in the project research at Nudgee College - mostly carried out by David Masel - which has uncovered worthwhile material and pre-1874 data which may illuminate Bryant's previous work. This 'new' information requires thorough evaluation and it is too soon to write the verdict of history on John Murtagh Macrossan.

I prefer to let the Centenary of Federation dust settle for a while before putting pen to paper or, more correctly, fingers to keyboard. When the time is ripe I would very much like to tell the story - faithfully and objectively without casting the principal players as heroes or villains - and allow readers to reach their own conclusion.

In the interim, I would like to offer the following address by the Hon. John Macrossan, Chief Justice of Queensland (retired) on the occasion of Archbishop John Bathersby blessing the Macrossan Room at Nudgee College on 19 March 2001.

**Address By The Hon John Macrossan, Chief Justice Of Qld
(Retired)**

On The Occasion Of Archbishop John Bathersby Blessing The Macrossan Room At Nudgee College On 19 March 2001

Thank you for inviting me here to speak today. Why a Macrossan Room? The short answer is that John Murtagh Macrossan enjoyed an eminent career in the political life of colonial Queensland and was a principal contributor to the cause of Federation. His untimely death occurred during the course of the 1891 Federal Convention in Sydney. He therefore did not live to see the birth in 1901 of our federated nation whose centenary we celebrate this year.

I am informed that Nudgee College records indicate that five of his sons were enrolled at the College. Nudgee College itself, founded in 1891, is an institution that has played a long and honoured role in the history of education in this State. This year of the centenary of Federation is one in which a heightened sense of history prevails. Enrolment in the College records may not mean that all of the sons of John Macrossan actually attended as long term students. I did not recall that my father, Vincent, had been a student

at Nudgee but I am prepared to assume that the suggestion is correct. I know that he was a student at Windsor State School and at Brisbane Grammar School. I am perfectly willing to have my recollection corrected.

When John Macrossan died in 1891, his son Hugh was ten years old, Vincent seven and Neal, the youngest was two. I mention these three sons because of all the children they enjoyed the longest careers in their chosen profession which in each case was law. Hugh and Neal, after practicing at the Bar in Brisbane became Judges and then Chief Justices of Queensland and Vincent, a solicitor, was a partner in firms in Mackay and then in Brisbane for lengthy periods.

The ages of these children when their father died are worth mentioning because they show the determination with which John Macrossan's widow Bridget, left on her husband's death with scant resources, reacted to the need to secure the education of her offspring. Sympathetic consideration is due to Bridget in her lonely situation of extended widowhood for some forty years through to the nineteen-thirties.

There is no need to repeat details of the public careers of John Murtagh Macrossan and his sons. In the case of John Macrossan it can be found fairly fully recorded in two written accounts provided by Harrison Bryant. But in this centenary year I shall contribute my own assessment of one matter that lies at the heart of our journey to Federation.

It is said from time to time, that Sir Henry Parkes is the Father of Federation and I think this is a claim both fairly made and worthy of acceptance. At a critical time he was instrumental in arranging that the 1890 Federal Conference in Melbourne should be held and then in steering through a carefully worded resolution supporting

early federation of the colonies and calling for a Convention to be held to settle details of a Constitution. That Convention was duly held early in 1891 and at it the Constitution as we have it was substantially drafted. It was put to the people in referendums held at the end of the decade and won their acceptance. The critical pathway forward was thus through the 1890 Conference and the 1891 Convention and on to its adoption by the colonies. In this way was our nation brought into existence.

While it was the initiatives of Sir Henry Parkes that thus bore eventual fruit, he did not do it all unaided. At the 1890 Conference, amongst the delegates there were some who wavered and were merely halfhearted supporters or relatively timid souls having difficulty in seeing that the time was truly ripe. A reading of the transcript of the proceedings reveals that John Macrossan played a vital role in pulling the direction of the Conference together and securing unanimous support for the central resolution. Parkes, in records he has left behind, acknowledges this.

Therefore we can say that the nation of which we are a part, is indebted to John Macrossan, the immigrant from Donegal, and that fact, together with the connection of his sons with this College and their own separate achievements, justifies the naming of this room in memoriam.

Putting to one side his public career, the briefest of biographical notes could record that John Macrossan was born in Creeslough on Sheep Haven in Donegal and had, as was not uncommon, a connection in his education and upbringing with Glasgow before coming out to Australia. Here, as a goldminer, he followed the diggings in Victoria and northern Queensland. His wife Bridget was born in County Clare and having come out to Australia, was living in Townsville when they married. His subsequent political career necessitated their moving to Brisbane.

After his death the family were living for a time in Albion. My recollection, rather uncertain, is that the Albion house was in Stoneleigh Street. Afterwards they moved to John Street, Clayfield in a house the basic portion of which still stands although there has been some reconstruction undertaken. The street has been renamed Batman Street and the house is the one now numbered 29. Earlier, before street numbering was introduced, it was named, appropriately enough, *Creslough*. I think that one “e” was omitted. At least it was pronounced without the long “ee” sound.

The only daughter, Mary, lived on the same side of the street at the top of the hill. I think that house is now gone although one beside it of very similar appearance is still there. Mary had married the Consul for Imperial Germany but she, too, had a long widowhood.

Apart from the ones already mentioned, there were two other sons who survived into adulthood. They were John who had gone to South Africa to the Boer War and later became a solicitor and Brian who had been a keen amateur boxer. I believe he may have been a geologist. He died in the pneumonia epidemic which swept the country around the time of the first world war.