

Gale, Walter Augustus: Clerk 1917–1927

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Walter Augustus Gale (1864–1927), third Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born on 22 December 1864 at Geraldton, Western Australia, youngest son of William Gale, merchant and collector of customs, and his wife, Mary Ann, née Scott. Educated at Perth High School and St Peter's College, Adelaide, in 1884 Walter proceeded to Exeter College, Oxford, on a scholarship. An able athlete, he represented Exeter in rowing and running, but due to 'some temporary setback in the family fortunes' (*Bulletin* 1927, 22), he returned to Perth before he could graduate.

Gale gained employment at Perth High School before entering the Colonial Secretary's Office as assistant registrar in 1886. He remained there for two years, then served as secretary to the Central Board of Education. Also known as a poet and songwriter, he wrote the words for the 'Proclamation Hymn' performed on 21 October 1890 when the new Constitution of Western Australia was proclaimed.

In 1891 Gale was appointed Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. During his decade in the role, he became one of the 'brightest protégés' (*News* 1927, 1) of Premier Sir John Forrest. Forrest appointed Gale also as Parliamentary Librarian, thereby conveniently supplementing his salary to match that of his previous job (WA Parliament 1891, 179). On 18 November 1896, Gale married Georgiana Kennedy Richardson-Bunbury at St Mary's Church, Busselton. Her parents were William Richardson-Bunbury and Amelia, née Molloy, daughter of Georgiana and John Molloy, two of the earliest settlers in the Busselton region. The couple's social standing was underscored by their wedding ceremony being performed by the Anglican Bishop of Perth, Charles Riley, and a guest list that included Sir John and Lady Forrest and members of such established colonial families as the Burts, Piesses, Prinseps, and Lee-Steeres (*West Australian* 1896, 10).

As one of the colonial premiers who switched to the federal parliament in 1901, Forrest was influential in Gale's appointment as Second Clerk Assistant in the new House of Representatives in May that year. Having moved to Melbourne, in July,

'ORDER, ORDER!'



Figure 26: Walter Gale.

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/8249 #PIC/8249, Laura Greenham.

he became Clerk Assistant. During World War I, Gale's verse became prominent. His patriotic poem of 1915 'Play the Game!' was widely used in recruiting, including by being issued as a postcard. It concluded: 'Leave football to the beardless boys / Too young to make a deathless name / Leave life's poor toys, seek life's stern joys / Fight the good fight, and Play THE Game!' (Gale 1915, 8). In 1916 he produced a booklet of verse entitled *Are We Downhearted? NO, NO* (Gale 1916).

The foremost criterion for the promotion of parliamentary officers in the young federal parliament was seniority and so, when Sir Charles Gavan Duffy vacated the Clerkship of the House to become Clerk of the Senate, Gale moved up to replace him on 1 February 1917. He was appointed CMG in 1920. Despite such recognition, in November 1920, he had to fight for an appropriate salary. Other parliamentary officers, including some less experienced, were granted raises that placed their salaries above his £1,000 per annum—unaltered since 1917. In meticulously setting out his case for a higher salary and claim to the honorary title of Clerk of the Parliaments, which had been vacant since 1908, he revealed much about the nature of his duties. These were 'of a highly technical and often very exacting nature, requiring ... an intimate knowledge of the Standing Orders, Parliamentary practice and procedure, and Constitutional law' (Gale 1920). Additionally, the Clerk's workload had increased with the expansion of the parliament's responsibilities—one reason for the raises bestowed on other parliamentary officers. The Clerks of state legislative assemblies and his counterparts in other national parliaments, including those of South Africa and Canada, were all better paid than Gale. His well-researched case was supported by the Speaker of the House, Sir William Elliot Johnson, but was initially refused by the prime minister, William Morris Hughes, with the support of the President of the Senate, Thomas Givens. A salary rise was finally granted in December 1921.

Frank Green, Gale's Clerk of Records, felt that, as a Tasmanian, he had much in common with his senior, who also hailed from what was then still a small state. He recalled that Gale 'taught me patience and tolerance in handling politicians' (Green 1969, 33)—no small necessity for a successful Clerk. Gale was so scrupulously politically neutral that when compulsory voting was introduced for federal elections in 1924, he preferred to be fined rather than cast a vote (Green 1969, 33). Green and Gale were both members of Melbourne's bohemian Yorick Club, as were Assistant Clerk John McGregor, and the future Speaker William Watt.

In 1920 Gale was appointed honorary secretary of the Australian branch of the Empire Parliamentary Association, involving him in international representations. The association's meetings were held around the Empire and so, in 1924, he visited South Africa as a guest of the Empire Parliamentary Delegation. In September 1926, he accompanied a delegation from Britain on a trip to Cairns in north Queensland.

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The association's meetings set the stage for the Balfour Declaration of 1926 that laid foundations for the Statute of Westminster in 1931, affirming the independence of dominions within the Empire.

By the mid-1920s, Gale was experiencing poor health and was diagnosed with heart disease, but he continued with his duties. In 1927 he became the first Clerk to be based in Canberra when federal parliament relocated from Melbourne. His wife remained in their home at South Yarra, possibly due to the shortage of housing in the new capital (*Canberra Times* 1927, 8). On the morning of 27 July 1927, he was conversing in his office adjacent to the House of Representatives chamber with his one-time best man, Major C. J. Griffiths, about 'old times when we were boys together' (*Canberra Times* 1927, 8), when he felt ill and phoned Green to come to his office. Almost immediately after, he slumped in his chair. Griffiths called a doctor, who pronounced Gale dead, the victim of a heart attack. He was buried at the Anglican Church of St John the Baptist, Reid.

One of the first items of business for the House on its first full working day at its new home on 28 September 1927 was the delivery of eulogies to Gale. Prime Minister Stanley (Viscount) Bruce, Hughes, and Johnson each described him as a 'guide, philosopher and friend' (H.R. Deb. 28.9.1927, 22–25). A holly tree was planted outside his former office in his memory. In September 1928, a memorial brass tablet was unveiled at St John's to honour Gale and his short-lived successor, John McGregor: 'a tribute of affectionate remembrance from Officers of the Parliament of the Commonwealth'. Described as 'a tall, distinguished looking man' (*News* 1927, 1) and as possessing 'a quiet wit' (*Bulletin* 1927, 22), Gale was survived by his wife, a daughter, Doreen, and three sons, Frederick, Dermot, and Mervyn.

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