

# Joshua Thomas Bell

## Queensland and the Darling Downs

### 1889-1911

by D. B. Waterson

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The pastoral, legal and political career of Joshua Thomas Bell illuminates certain aspects of Queensland in general and Darling Downs history in particular during a critical time in that region's evolution. When Bell first entered the Queensland Legislative Assembly for the Northern Downs constituency of Dalby in 1893 (a seat which he was to retain until his death nineteen years later), the colony, society and landscape of the Downs were about to undergo their third major transformation since the coming of European pastoralists and the hesitant establishment of selector-based agriculture during the 1860s and 1870s. Bell's personal origins and subsequent career – he was born in 1863 – thus spans two of the most significant phases in the European history of the region.<sup>1</sup>

Bell, scion of an old-established Queensland pastoral family, now in the hands of the financially unstable Darling Downs & Western Land Company and its overdraft master, the Queensland National Bank, entered Parliament at the time of the massive financial crash in Queensland. Yet the Darling Downs was about to embark on a thorough reconstruction and expansion of its rural enterprises. Bell's period in Parliament saw a rapid increase in rural productivity and population on the Downs – more than in other parts of Queensland, including Brisbane – and an acceleration of Toowoomba's rise to prominence as the regional capital. The application of new technology, particularly in refrigeration and plant breeding, the intervention of the State in distributing old pastoral freehold estates to

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small family farmers, as well as its role in expanding the rural and urban infrastructures, were all powerful contributing factors. Such impulses seemed to produce almost instantaneous change and consolidation in the Downs' regional economy. The two decades between 1890 and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 were characterized by the growing diversification of profitable small-scale agriculture, the incredibly rapid rise of small labour-intensive dairy farming, particularly on the inner Downs, the growing viability of grain growing, and the emergence of what agrarian radicals had always advocated, an increasing number of capitalist farmers who could combine mixed grain and fodder production with the rearing of sheep, cows and cattle.

These golden years in the "Garden of Queensland" were reflected in the shifting nature of Downs politics and particularly in the classic Federal election campaign of 1901. In this contest two champions of Queensland liberalism, both representing different strands of the same philosophy, confronted each other. The outcome, the defeat of the long-dead "Squire" of Jimbour's lawyer son, Joshua Thomas Bell, by the even younger barrister son of that master of Darling Downs agrarian and urban politics, W.H. Groom, set the pattern for the region's involvement in the new Commonwealth politics for the next generation. In State terms, however, Bell's career illustrates some of the problems of Queensland politics which emerged after the 1893 crash, and the tensions and strains of economic and social reconstruction which were to distinguish Queensland politics before Labour's overwhelming victory in 1915. In essence, Bell's ability to defeat reasonably strong Labor challenges from pastoral processing and urban workers in his so-called "pocket borough" of Dalby was not without lessons for the future course and character of anti-Labor politics. Finally, his political life provides us with a Downs example of the human 'type' noticed by Hancock and celebrated by C.E.W. Bean – the independent Australian-Briton of solid pioneering origins, educated in England and with an attractive mix of erudition, fluency, geniality and outdoors sporting and recreation skills.

Not that personal qualities, however electorally appealing, are sufficient in themselves to explain his success in Downs politics. In fact it must be admitted that Bell's air of superiority, cultivated *hauteur* and urban literacy were often a bar to his political advancement in Brisbane. Firmly committed to the elevation and consolidation of land settlement and development on the Darling Downs, prepared to use an ever-growing measure of the resources of the Commonwealth Government to assist the consolidation of small-scale farming capital, and more than competent as a roads-and-bridges politician, Bell's political survival was founded on strong economic and social factors.



*Joshua Thomas Bell*

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, however, that Bell, in spite of his contribution to State politics as Minister for Lands and Speaker in the Legislative Assembly, never quite rose to those heights of power and influence that his talents and ambitions suggested. Too 'liberal' for the pastoral fraternity of the West and too radical and innovative for the conservative business establishment that was so busily picking up the pieces after the crash, Bell, despite a brief flirtation with the Labor Party, really had nowhere to go in politics after his 1901 defeat. His tenure of the Lands portfolio, while successful and vigorous, was scarcely creative or innovative, and his sideways promotion to the Speaker's chair reflected that further glittering prizes in politics were now beyond his grasp. His untimely and agonizing illness, from the first attack on the Kaimkillenbun racecourse in July 1910 to his death from peritonitis at home in Graceville on 10th March 1911, ended the career of the most intellectually capable member of a family who had been involved in the fortunes and politics of the Darling Downs for over fifty years.

#### **BARRISTER, BUSINESSMAN AND PARLIAMENTARIAN**

Joshua Bell was born on his father's estate at Limestone Hill, Ipswich, on 8th March 1863. He was the eldest son of Sir Joshua Peter Bell of Jimbour and his wife, Margaret Miller Dorsey. Following private education and secondary schooling at the Ipswich and Brisbane Grammar Schools, he studied, between 1881 and 1885, at Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, where he was President of the Union and gained some minor reputation in debating with a wide range of English politicians including Reginald McKenna and Austen Chamberlain. After studying at the Inner Temple he was called to the English Bar and was Mr Justice Grantham's marshal at the Northern Assizes.

Returning to Queensland in 1889, he assumed a directorship of the Darling Downs & Western Land Company, whose Jimbour Estate was the original core of the family business enterprises. Between 1890 and 1892 he was Sir Samuel Griffith's private secretary on £300 per annum, and following the collapse of the Land Company and the demolition of the Bell family fortunes he entered Parliament as Member for Dalby. This seat he retained until his death. While he actively practised as a barrister, specializing in pastoral lease cases, his first influential task was his membership of the seminal Royal Commission on Land Settlement in 1897. This was followed by his appointment as Chairman of Committees in 1902 and his assumption of the Public Lands portfolio in the Morgan and two Kidston ministries between 1903 and 1908. Bell was Home Secretary for eight months during 1908-1909 and was elected Speaker in the latter year.<sup>2</sup>

In appearance “Joey” Bell, as he was known, was a smaller version of his old father. Fashionably dressed with black-ribboned monocle, he adopted in public life a rather dandyish and superior air which, although it concealed a basic shyness and insecurity, tended to irritate his Labor and Conservative opponents alike. His aloof manner, however, does not seem to have affected his ability to attract votes in the Dalby area. Two contemporary accounts confirm this picture. A visitor to Jimbour in 1898, Charles Trevelyan, the son of Sir George Otto Trevelyan, one of the members of the Victorian liberal elite, noted that Bell was a superb electioneer and effective custodian of the 900 souls in Dalby. He was able to take advantage of what Trevelyan observed was “striking absence of class feeling” amongst squatters, tradesmen and the more prosperous farmers of the Dalby area. While Bell was a somewhat pompous fellow, he was a good horseman, fine oarsman and rifle shot, a competent drover and excellent station-hand. With that condescension towards ‘colonials’ which members of the British elite expressed so well, Trevelyan noted

Bell is upright and honourable, he knows something of politics and leans to Liberalism, but he is not strong enough to have a policy. So he, like the rest, wins and keeps his constituency by what he gets done for them. He has just succeeded in getting a house for consumptives built by the government near Dalby, which is expected to bring many into the district and therefore to profit him at election time.<sup>3</sup>

Like other landowners before him he encouraged old Jimbour hands to settle on the resumed lands of the run and when, partly as a result of his efforts, the Jimbour freehold was resumed in 1908 he continued this policy. This was not the first time in Darling Downs history that a network of voters and their families, sympathetic towards “Master Joey”, had been developed to replace the organic community around the old two-storied stone house. As the Bells were by then “rather reduced in circumstances”, clinging on with the sufferance of the bank and managing the estate without access to the slender profits, this was now a valuable electoral plus which, in the 1900s, replaced the old pastoral patronage of his father. For example, Sir Joshua Bell had not only provided the usual amenities of church, school, shops and artisans’ establishments for his workers and adjacent settlers, but had also hired Ashton’s Circus. G.H. Routley, himself a son of a Moola grazing farmer, confirmed this in his reminiscences of the son:

“Mr Joey” was a splendid specimen of a typical English gentleman and could haw-haw on occasion. He wore a monocle eternally. . . when he screwed this glass into his eye, the better to scrutinize you, one was compelled to keep a sober face but at the same time you had to realise that you

were in the presence of a highly cultured, always courteous, dignified, somewhat patronising gentleman, who had a great enthusiasm for his job.<sup>4</sup>

Bell loved Queensland – not only in the abstract but as a fine hand piloting a dray over rough country, observing with a connoisseur’s eye the good land and noble forests between Camooweal and Cloncurry.

His “tall, rather staid mother” continually talked of the good old days until her death; but Joshua had been born in a slab hut after the first homestead had been burnt down, had worked actively and successfully for Moola and Jimbour to be acquired for closer settlement by the State, and had seen a town named after him. Thus the transition from Pure Merino status to a relatively impoverished ‘squire’ was infinitely more tolerable than the experience of so many others on the Downs.

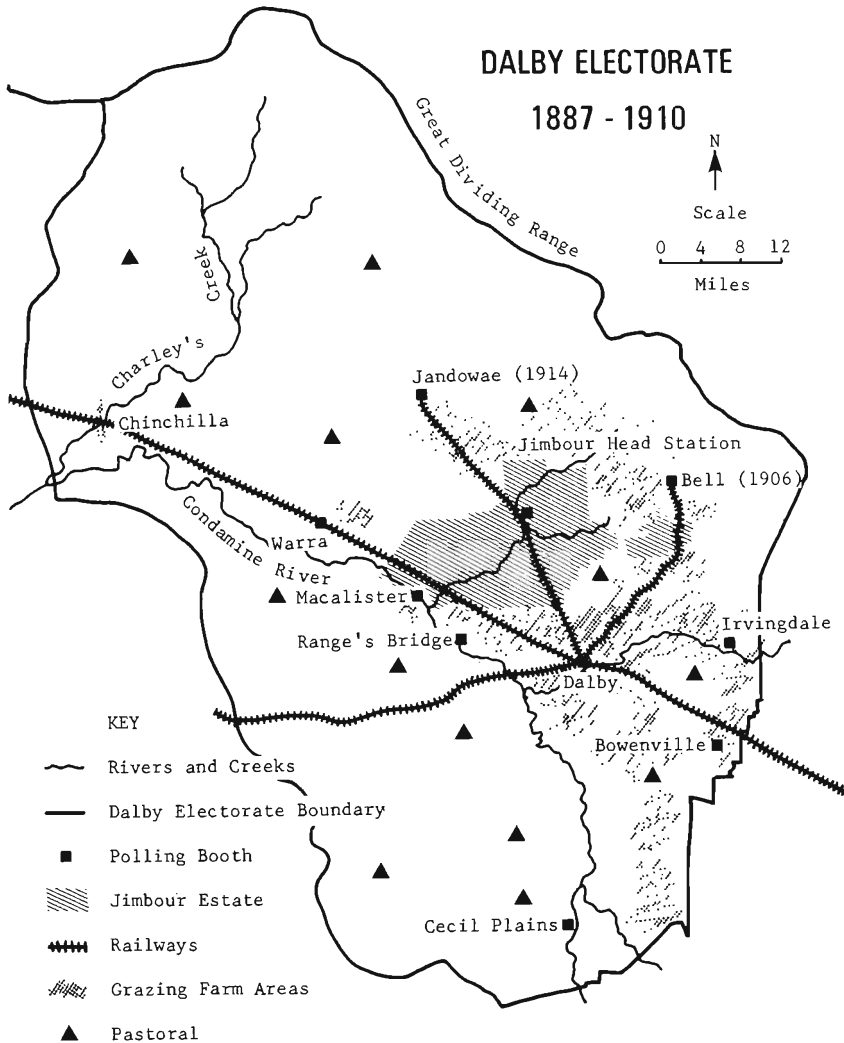
It was “Joey” who insisted in November 1893 that the assignation of Lady Bell’s marriage settlement to the Queensland National Bank was the only alternative to the forfeiture of Jimbour. Not that this step saved the family property. Again, in 1894, Bell was a conservative influence when his mother wanted to sue the trustees of Sir Joshua Peter Bell’s estate, B.D. Morehead and Sir Arthur Palmer, for “glaring breaches of trust”. As his brother noted:

Joey feels that the action would not be worth it . . . [yet] can our situation be any worse than it is at present? . . . Joey has sacrificed himself as much as any man can sacrifice himself to protect the Trustees when he signed the assignment.<sup>5</sup>

But Bell managed to retain the loyalties of Jimbour identities – in fact he named most of the streets of Bell after them – and was also on fair patriarchal terms with two great Aboriginal sportsmen born on the Jimbour run: Charlie Samuells the footrunner and Jerry Jerome, middle-weight champion of Australia in 1913 who, after entering the ring when he was an elderly thirty-three years of age, won 35 out of 58 professional fights.<sup>6</sup>

### A LIBERAL POLITICIAN

Beneath these grass-roots considerations in a minor Queensland constituency lay more significant elements. Unlike C.H. Pearson, Alfred Deakin, and the New Zealand ideologue, William Pember Reeves, Bell never developed a coherent set of ideas or a series of what could be regarded as innovatory and qualitative policies. His liberalism was still the liberalism of the old Griffith-type, but with more vigorous State intervention under the supervision of naturally superior and educated leaders. Improvements to both the condition and numbers of the people through land settlement and roads, railways and bridges would necessarily follow.



Sources: Queensland Electoral Atlas, 1887 (Q.Parl.Library); Parish Maps

Bell found it troublesome to come to terms with the new schisms and movements. He feared that the State, if engaged too deeply in social and economic affairs, would cripple the rights of the individual to make money and would keep the class situation unchanged. But he also flirted with the Labor Party – those rather rough and often vulgar fellows who, in the past, had been involved in so much strike action. The former worry was stringently expressed in 1896:

We have heard a great deal about ‘individualism’ and ‘socialism’ . . . I think if we are to have any ‘ism’ at all, the ‘ism’ we should follow is opportunism. What is ‘opportunism’ as I understand it? I believe that it is adopting the opportune line of action which is dictated by the exigencies of the situation, irrespective of the tenets of any political party. If we adopt that course which experience tells us we ought to adopt, without hesitating to take the step because it is socialist, or individualistic, we shall reach a successful goal more readily . . . I have no fear of socialism . . . if I were to make a statement in regard to an abstract principle, I might say that on the whole the tendency of this country will be towards socialism, but very slowly and certainly ‘not in our time’.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, this view has been accepted and adopted by the majority of Labor parliamentarians both before and since their various elections.

A year before, during the great strike, Bell had refused to accept the notion that the State should intervene in this “sphere of controversy”. He believed that courts should be set up by the State to arbitrate and conciliate – as in New Zealand – but that parliament should not be directly involved. Nevertheless, his true feelings were ventilated in a tirade in support of the Peace Preservation Bill (the Coercion Act) when he stated that “although there is no man engaged in the pastoral industry who is in his nature or constitutionally more liberal-minded or, if you like, more radically disposed than myself . . . [yet] I consider this strike a most deplorable strike, a strike which never should have occurred . . . It is a strike . . . of a contemptible clique”.<sup>8</sup>

Hardacre, the Labor member, recognised the liberal core under the radical veneer when he quite rightfully pointed out that Bell, whatever his intellectual predilections, was constitutionally incapable of breaking the ties of upbringing and class. Bell’s manner and feelings often revealed this. For instance, in proposing the reduction of the Agent-General’s salary in 1893, he argued that the present incumbent “should be a gentleman, as he had to meet with gentlemen from all parts of the world”.<sup>9</sup>

Increasingly Bell became the advocate of worthy minor causes. Given the decay of colonial liberalism this was to be expected, especially as property after the crash of the ‘nineties was not concerned, by and large, with humanitarian initiatives. His attempt to legislate for the protection of children in 1896, his support for female suffrage and the abolition of plural voting, and his support for such odd causes as the registration of both stallions and dentists, testify to this.



Behind it all was a touch of environmental determinism and a dash of the Adams notion that “the race” in Queensland could evolve through a set of challenges. As an old member of the Yeomanry in England, Bell commented just before the Boer War:

If we could be quite sure of repelling the enemy, I think that one of the best things that could happen to the community would be to suffer an attack as it would give us a national and a moral tone that in my opinion we are sadly in need of. The only danger is that we might not be able to repel the enemy.<sup>10</sup>

As befitting Sir Samuel Griffith’s ex-secretary during the Sydney Convention of 1891, Bell was a strong advocate of Australian federation. He argued largely along racial and national lines rather than economic desirability. “This is an age of great communities”, he said, “and I think that the man is really not a man who does not feel some impulse to belong to a great community – to a great nation.”<sup>11</sup> Following his semi-nationalist and imperialist feelings Bell supported the popular election of delegates in 1897, and stressed his love for Australia and the need for Queensland to play a far more prominent role in the movement rather than simply provide a delegation that was no more than a “miserable geographic mixture”.<sup>12</sup>

### CHAMPION OF LAND REFORM

These issues, however important, were basically of secondary concern to him. His goals were best expressed in his attitude towards the investigation, framing and execution of land policy. His maiden speech on 11th August 1893 was on the ill-fated Co-operative Communities Land Settlement Bill which was intended to put poor men on the land as a panacea for unemployment and depression. Bell saw “hundreds of thousands of acres of the richest land in the world lying uninhabited and crying out for settlement.”<sup>13</sup> These themes were continued with his support of the Agricultural Lands Purchase Bill of 1894, a New Zealand-inspired device to enable the big estates to be purchased by the Crown and then to be redistributed to mixed farmers. Bell’s complex personal feelings about the Jimbour Estate, as well as his obvious interest in creating a grateful electoral clientele on the Downs, lay behind such advocacy. As he said during the debate, “the land legislation of the government is its chief claim to memory in the history of a country . . . I believe it is the paramount duty of a government to settle people upon the land.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout the 1890s he pressed a somewhat stagnant Ministry for a more vigorous land and public works policy along the best New Zealand lines. Prematurely pleading for a revival of borrowing on the London market, he was worried by the depression, the rising tide of Labor, and the “threat” of economic decline and political radicalism to such

gateway towns as Dalby.<sup>15</sup> Hence, during the debate on yet another Crown Lands Bill in 1894, he stressed once again the use of land settlement as a safety valve. For the first time he abandoned the minute settlements of the communities and came out in favour of grazing homesteads of 2,560 acres or more being allocated to new settlers on the northern and western Downs. Associated with the conventional state-controlled land registration and selection, he argued, should be an agricultural college (naturally to be established near Dalby), cheaper state credit, more railways, and the deliberate coddling of farmers, “if such coddling was necessary”.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from his tenure of the Lands Department perhaps Bell’s most important contribution was as a member of the Royal Commission on Land Settlement, chaired by W.H. Groom in 1897. Bell played a considerable part in this useful survey of the pastoral and agricultural land settlement in Queensland and did all he could to have the ideas accepted. Of most significance was his personal examination of a vast area of Queensland from Cairns to Brisbane, as well as his apprenticeship in administrative procedures and policy.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, once he had assumed the Lands portfolio, Bell really had nothing new to add, except for his technical mastery and the implementation of some of the views that he had expressed in the 1890s. Indeed he underestimated agrarian problems and the State’s immediate capacity for economic growth.

Yet the Northern Downs did grow – perhaps more than rural Queensland as a whole, although less than the central and southern Downs. Furthermore, Bell’s Dalby fiefdom did rest on certain prosopographical advantages as the following table demonstrates.

### Three Darling Downs Electorates 1901\*

	Dalby (country town/ pastoral)	Drayton and Toowoomba (urban)	Cunningham (agricultural/ country town)
Total population	4,509	14,108	8,681
Total adults	2,289	7,309	3,950
Adult males	1,356	3,513	2,310
Eligible voters	1,286	3,168	2,250
Enrolled voters	1,074	3,121	1,767
% of enrolled voters to average of total population of all electorates	15.07	22.28	20.6

\*Drayton and Toowoomba had two members in 1901, the others one each.<sup>18</sup>

This help aside, Bell was undoubtedly assisted by economic and population movements which consistently undercut Labor’s rising appeal to pastoral workers, Irish Roman Catholics, railway and service employees of the villages and towns, the construction proletariat and dissatisfied small-farmers of “Strugglers’ Gullies”. Election results confirm this. In 1893 Bell, with 280 votes, was 184 behind the combined totals of his labour and conservative opponents.

Bell had refused McIlwraith's plea to retire in favour of Jessop and then had succeeded in securing the contingent or preferential vote needed to defeat both the conservative and labour candidates. The "return of a local man who held liberal and progressive opinions" had triumphed over "capital" and the Labor candidate McCarthy's fifteen months' paid canvassing. In 1896, however, he was well clear of Labor and, apart from a fright in 1902, he steadily increased his majority until in 1908 he secured 1,277 votes out of a total poll of 1,739. In 1899 he was elected unopposed. What Bell had managed to do, like most rural politicians, was to juggle specific local images of the present and not-so-distant future and connect them with new and very obvious public works. Thus Jimbour House in 1898 could be seen, in spite of its rather faded glories, as a sample of Bell's power base and interest in the region.<sup>20</sup>

It stands on a gentle slope on the edge of the great bare plains. Directly the plains end, the trees begin. They grow about as thickly as in an apple orchard, and all the country, except for a few patches of scrub, feeds sheep and cattle. The station, or houses of the station cover several acres. The buildings are dotted about higgledy piggledy. Here stands the single men's lodging, a long building with several rooms. Here is the blacksmith's shop, the ground round littered with agricultural machinery. Here are two or three neat cottages with bits of garden and untidy hen-coops. Next is the cook's kitchen and dining place for the men. Opposite is the store, full of all necessities, with a reading room at one end, much frequented at night by the older men, at the other end the post office and office of the station. It is not a wild, outlandish place. There is a daily post, and a yesterdaily paper, a telegraph, a fortnightly man of God, a better school than the average English country school, a reading room and novel library, a good modern library at the hall, poets and current literature at Taylor's the managers. We dress for dinner.<sup>21</sup>

Contrast this reality with Bell's catalytic role in the Darling Downs "Bunch" of 1901-1904. This group attempted to use unstable formal policies in Queensland as a means of deriving special benefits for the Darling Downs, particularly in terms of railways, freight concessions and land settlements; they also vetoed a threatened land tax. Contrast it, too, with Bell's involvement in the acquisition of Jimbour and the settlement of "a good class of southern settler" on the Irvingdale, Jimbour, Wyobie and Logie Plains estates. The Jimbour purchase was not an unmixed blessing, but Bell was dead before the problem of the small settlers crystallized.<sup>22</sup>

The only time he was seriously threatened was in 1904 when the

independent candidate, D.T. Dillon, himself disowned by the official Labor Party, came within fifteen votes of defeating him. While it is true that Bell emerged as a defender of Philp's conservative financial policies (although he did indeed cross the floor of the house to vote against the government on a land issue in 1901), and while half the electorate felt that he had too easily adhered to the conservatives, particularly during the terrible years of the great drought, nevertheless some part of the explanation for his close shave must be sought in the scandalous goings-on (for those times) at Jimbour House. Bell's brother, Oswald Marmaduke Dalby Bell, a stock dealer, had absconded to Hong Kong with Mrs Louisa Taylor, the wife of Thomas McIlwraith Taylor, manager of Jimbour. This event, coming as it did just before the election, undoubtedly offended simple bucolics, and smudged the Jimbur image.<sup>23</sup> Just before this difficulty Bell had entered the Federal lists as candidate for Darling Downs.

Between the crash of 1893 and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the Downs underwent unparalleled and apparently unstoppable economic growth. The emergence of Toowoomba as the unchallenged and unchallengeable key city of the region and one of Australia's fastest growing inland towns marked the triumph of the country-town agrarians. A whole new range of petit-bourgeois interests developed, spanning activities such as the teaching of English at Toowoomba Grammar School to the shop-girls in Piggott's, clerks at the Toowoomba Permanent Building Society and the newly affluent medicos and barristers living at the top of the Range.<sup>24</sup>

Toowoomba, proclaimed a city on 20 October 1904, was the third largest centre in Queensland by 1911. In the ten years between 1901 and 1911 the basic housing stock increased by 42% from 1,802 units to 2,550. No other Downs town could match this acceleration, although Toowoomba's population expressed as a percentage of the total number of people on the Darling Downs actually fell by nearly 2% over the period. The reasons for this, the last significant revival of rural population growth in Queensland (and indeed Australian) history are intriguing. In the countryside, the struggles and vicissitudes of the first generation of agricultural selectors had been succeeded by a new confidence and a feeling that at last the inner Downs at least was capable of delivering what the old propagandists of the 'sixties had said it could. This is not to argue that the personal hardships and struggles of all those on the land diminished. In fact the greater population and the consequent exposure of more people to all the complicated traumas of secondary pioneering probably meant that human difficulties, both measurable and undelineable, were just as acute. Yet by the turn of the century the realities of rural life, at least for those who were experiencing, field, farm and family, seemed to be less stark.

Steele Rudd's later writings, while episodic and distinctly inferior to his earlier "Selection pieces", describe the new twentieth-century feelings of sureness, confidence and hope. Contrast the famous, devastatingly ironic sparseness of "Dad's First Harvest" with this euphoric conclusion to "The Great Harvest" of twenty years later:

Then Titt and Mrs Duff . . . stood in silent admiration beside that imposing stack of grain piled high, sack upon sack . . . In deep reflection they gazed on the great harvest. A vista of the past – of those years of loss and failure, disappointment and gloom, came vividly to their minds . . . In the light of their eyes, animated with the joy of triumph, was reflected the dawning of prosperity.<sup>25</sup>

While the Downs had only 10% of Queensland's population in 1891 and 16% in 1911, the area grew far more rapidly than most other regions. Queensland's population increased by 22.65% between 1891 and 1901, and 22.04% in the following decade, but the Darling Downs figures were 35.46% and 54.57% respectively. In fact, the overall growth of Queensland's population between 1891 and 1911 was 49.69%; that of the Darling Downs 109.65%. In April 1913 two new shires, Millmerran and Pittsworth, were created to the south-west of Toowoomba where, together with the Central Downs, the major economic expansion was occurring. This was based on over a thousand new family farms carved from the Agricultural Lands Purchase Estates, private subdivision, and the successful diversification of the region's primary products.

During these twenty years such small towns as Chinchilla, Clifton, Crows Nest, Goombungee, Kilarney, and Pittsworth became established. The planting of such viable, small, extended villages however, despite their significance as material show-places demonstrating the success of surrounding rural settlement, was overshadowed by the expansion of the four major towns, Toowoomba, Warwick, Dalby and Allora.<sup>26</sup>

Obviously the development of small-scale agriculture, processing plants, governmental and social activities, and a whole network of service industries which were responding to the agricultural take-off, were responsible for this urban and semi-urban growth. And more sophisticated demographic, cultural and economic factors still await analysis: the increasing ability of the region to absorb and exploit a relatively high birth-rate, the availability of a reasonable transport, financial, religious and social infrastructure, the creeping accumulation of a healthy amount of "middle capital" available for local investment, and the availability and use, in however crude a form, of the new and effective farm and processing technology.<sup>27</sup>

## BID FOR FEDERAL POLITICS

Development, expansion, sureness were backdrops to new plays on the political stage. These themes, stages in the new theatre of Federal politics, merged in the second election for the Darling Downs Federal seat in September 1901. Bell, rather unfairly, was forced into a more conservative and less representative position than did justice to his intrinsic liberalism. Certainly his endorsement by a tired, conservative state coalition government did not help, but time and time again his opponent was able to tactically out-manoeuvre him and, in doing so, force him back to the very foundation of his support. Groom's father, William Henry Groom, was the inaugural Member in the Commonwealth Parliament for Darling Downs. An ex-convict, storekeeper, publican and agrarian radical, he subsequently became the epitome of improvement and respectability on the Downs. He had for long built up amongst the Toowoomba artisans, the successful selectors and Irish and German farmers and workers, an invaluable, almost impregnable political base. In addition his ownership of the only true regional newspaper, the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, meant that from the beginning Bell fought from a difficult social and tactical position. After all, Groom was in the best of all political situations: he was campaigning from a patriarch's coffin lid. And the patriarch was his father.<sup>28</sup>

Bell, standing as an "independent Bartonian" without effective Federal help, was hindered by sentiment, deficient organization and, more importantly, a narrowing economic base. Yet despite these inherent difficulties he still felt that he could capitalize on nativist sentiment which was undoubtedly so much a part of the force that had spawned the Commonwealth and which he had done so much to stimulate during his campaign for increased Queensland and Australian participation in the Boer War. He declared that:

Before all things else I am a Darling Downs man, and with some knowledge of many other places in the world I have always entertained the belief that Nature has been especially kind to that region where I have been bred up and passed, like my parents and grandparents before me, so many years of life.<sup>29</sup>

In contemporary Queensland politics Bell was faced with a candidate of appeal and quality who out-debated him on every tactical front. Littleton Groom, the official Barton candidate, was considered by some to be "the representative Queensland Liberal of his generation". On the radical wing of the Protectionist Party, he was, from the first, a centralist. In this way, given Bell's subsequent career, it is clear that Groom could easily outshine the Jimbour man within the new framework of Australian politics. Anti-conservative, a

national imperialist, and a man whose basic beliefs remained virtually unchanged throughout the next thirty years of his political life, he was able to tap those well-springs of the new liberalism which Bell was seldom able to exploit.<sup>30</sup>

On a wider plane, the whole contest set the pattern for the future course of major Downs politics. Groom was far more successful in suggesting that Commonwealth action and higher protectionism – be it economic or social – could reverse the losses of the 'nineties; that responsible government, if infused with new vigour, could avert class war; and that, in this region in particular, there was a natural community of interest which the majority could accept. In this context future regional historians may well argue that there could be some reassessment of the viability and strength of colonial liberalism compared with the apparent rise of Labor as the great organ of initiative.

Here then we have two native sons: one the product of the Toowoomba Grammar School, with scholarships at the University of Melbourne; the other educated by private tutors, private schools and Cambridge University. They were “somewhat self-assured, imperious and pompous” young men, devout and sincere Anglicans, concerned to use the responsibility of their religious structures to harden social cement around the strengthening steel of the local economy. Groom had further grass-roots advantages. In Toowoomba W.J. Peak continued to run a well-oiled Groom machine, the products of which were to belie the prediction of his friend, the poet George Essex Evans. In a letter to Alfred Deakin, Evans predicted, “Bell will get in . . . Groom will get the support of his father’s friends and the Labor vote but he has no political experience and that is against him”. Poets, of course, are usually not noted for political percipience. Yet Evans was correct in one significant area: Bell was hard hit when Henry Daniels, a pro-Labor candidate, withdrew in favour of Groom and secured him both the country and urban Labor vote.<sup>31</sup>

Groom was able to project a very powerful image of a vigorous candidate concerned with modernizing liberalism and social democratic principles, but in making an arrangement with the Labor Party he changed his chances from marginal to excellent. The informal compact was that Labor would withdraw from the regional field in exchange for his tacit urban support at the next State election. Another blow to Bell’s chances was the opposition of rising and potentially influential small-farmer leaders such as W.A. Deacon of Allora. During the campaign Bell failed to make any inroads into the burgeoning small-farming constituency. It was obvious that the old “pro-squatter” cry was still effective as Joseph Rigby, a farmer of

Yangan, pointed out in a letter to the *Toowoomba Chronicle* on 7 September 1901.<sup>32</sup>

Rather surprisingly, Bell had the support of all the local newspapers except the *Toowoomba Chronicle* and – most unfortunately for him – his home-town *Dalby Herald*. However, the editorial assistance of the *Brisbane Courier* plus the fact that his campaign was organized by D.J.R. Watson, Secretary of the National Liberal Union of Brisbane, and a group of Downs people which included conservative pastoralists such as W.B. Slade of Glengallan, the flourmiller John Archibald, the conservative R.G. Wonderley, and the politician A.J. Thynne tended to be counter-productive. Nor was Bell ever able to overcome the charge that his support for the White Australia policy was lukewarm at best and a mere mutter of expediency at worst. Echoing Pearson and his father, Groom made White Australia the dominant issue in the campaign. This was decisive as Bell supported an extension of time for Kanaka labour. He was unable to match the radical liberal programme which included greater Federal expenditure, compulsory arbitration and conciliation, and Federal old-age pensions which Groom put forward.<sup>33</sup>

Bell also made another, more credible, mistake. He inferred that the new Immigration Restriction Act with its dictation test would exclude German and Scandinavian immigrants. This enabled Groom to turn the tables on him and consolidate the solid German farming vote which his father had done so much to secure. Deakin's speech during the second reading of the Immigration Restriction Bill was reproduced in large type and undoubtedly hardened Groom's base. As Deakin stated:

There was no intention to keep out either Germans or Scandinavians or members of like races. These people had helped to build up Australia . . . this Bill was intended to exclude coloured aliens and undesirable whites, but not the class of whites to which the Commonwealth owed so much. It did not matter whether Germans, Scandinavians etc. could fulfil the educational test or not. We had the opportunity of securing the Continent from an influx of coloured aliens.<sup>34</sup>

But there were other factors operating. Farmers quite rightly suspected that Bell was not as strongly protectionist for Darling Downs farmers as Groom was. He never got on top of Groom during the campaign and was obviously sensitive to attacks that he was “always an academic rather than a practical parliamentarian”, and that he had lacked vigour and success in the political race for promotion. Indeed when he attacked Groom head on, declaring that “cases are found in the human race – as in the equine race – when the excellence of the sire is not always transmitted to the offspring”, the



tables were neatly turned by his opponent whose committee continued to flood the literature and newspapers with flashily printed funeral tributes to old W.H. Groom, that Queensland martyr to the Melbourne climate.<sup>35</sup> As polling day approached it was obvious that Bell, bearing the colours cerise and white, was going to go out to Groom and his blue and white. The results confirmed this:

	Groom	Bell
Drayton and Toowoomba	1,485	764
Aubigny	606	178
Cambooya	785	397
Carnarvon	306	187
Cunningham	583	327
Dalby	433	320
Warwick	302	457
Brisbane	32	57
	4,532	2,687

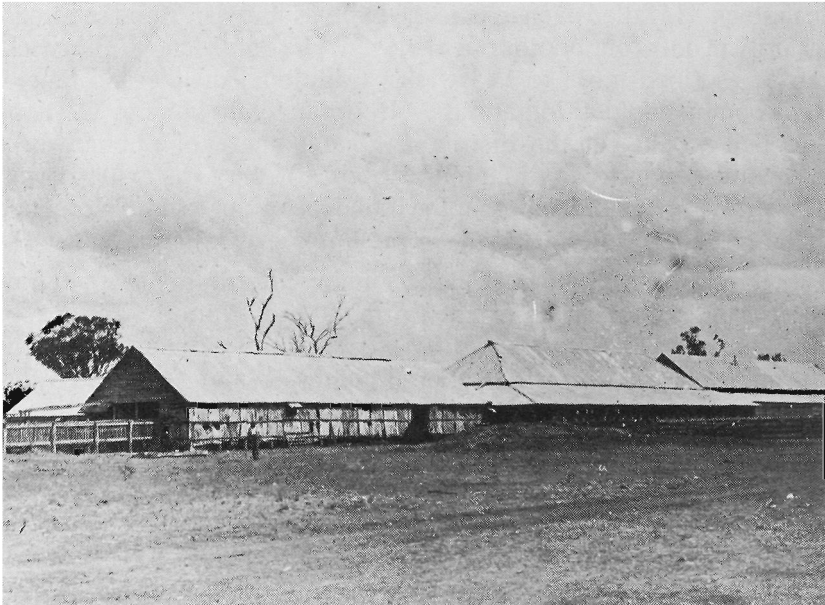
Groom's majority of 1,845 was a tremendous victory for him, and the finish of Bell's chances to enter Commonwealth politics. While Bell polled best of all in the more pastoral areas of the electorate, he did badly in Toowoomba and disastrously in the small-scale agricultural settlements with large proportions of people of German and Irish stock. He failed even to take the Dalby subdivision and secured a majority in only four booths out of eleven. His only victory, Warwick, can be ascribed more to Warwick's traditional dislike and fear of Toowoomba competition and the Groom machine, and to the hope that Bell would get the district a greater share of public works expenditure than to any inherent support for the Graceville lawyer himself. It is probable, too, that the influence of Sir Arthur Morgan, a friend of Bell's, was significant in the latter's own fiefdom.<sup>36</sup>

Bell returned to State politics. His major contributions would now be in land administration, the formation of various anti-Labor coalitions, and finally in presiding with skill and eloquence over the Legislative Assembly. His disappointment was later alleviated by his marriage in 1903 to the widow Catherine Jane Jones, the daughter of a Mount Morgan mining partner, Senator John Ferguson of Rockhampton. By her he had a son ("Wee Joey") and a daughter.<sup>37</sup>

Between September 1903 and October 1908 Bell was Secretary of Public Lands, although during July and November 1907 he was temporarily shifted to the Public Works portfolio in order to facilitate Kidston's accommodation of the ex-Labor member, George Kerr. Bell set the tone for his occupancy of Lands when he noted that while he was thoroughly convinced that it was a tremendous mistake to alienate our lands, he still suggested that "the backbone of the country

[was] really the 1,280-acre man” and these were the men (obviously Dalby voters and potential settlers) whose causes he would advance.<sup>38</sup> Yet apart from the acquisition of the Jimbour estate Bell made little impact on vital land legislation, although in 1908 and 1909 he did pass two Amendment Acts which liberalized the conditions under which potential grazing farmers could take up land, and softened the rent and conditional clauses so far as grazing and agricultural selectors were concerned. In such legislation, however, no new principles were enacted. With the assistance of the Under Secretary for Lands, W.J. Scott, settlement on the Downs and elsewhere proceeded apace, but Bell, although effective as an administrator, does not appear to have been particularly happy in the role. It is clear that he would have preferred to introduce more radical legislation but Kidston’s slow shift to the Right gave him no room to manoeuvre.

Bell moved towards Labor in 1908 but the step was hesitant and the commitment weak. A conversation with the Leader of the Labor Party, Bowman, shows how far, or how little, Bell was prepared to



*Jimbour Station Woolshed. (R.H.S.Q. Collection)*

move. Bowman had suggested that Bell was veering towards the Left with his radical views on more liberal land legislation. Bell replied, "Yes; I shall be signing the platform next". To this Bowman said, "That would not at all surprise us". Bell wound up hoping that he would "receive a hearty welcome", but this banter, which exposed the difficulties of his political and personal positions, was as far as matters ever went.<sup>39</sup>

His future was solved in June 1909 when, on the death of the Speaker, T.J. Leahy, Bell was neutralized and sank, one suspects rather languidly but thoughtfully, into the Speaker's chair. Once again this man of marked "democratic opinions" who had voted for all of Kidston's radical legislation – the Wages Board, tax on land monopolies, perpetual lease legislation and the one man/one vote reforms – had been the victim of internal strife within the anti-Labor coalition. In short he had to go from the Cabinet because of the rising power of the conservative faction and because his portfolio was needed to satisfy them.

His election to the Speakership was a close one – 37 votes to 35. It was, then, his own vote which secured the position. In 1909 he was again challenged, and although Labor became increasingly irritated by his pedantic, lecturing manner and assertion of rigid order in the Chamber, he survived and indeed grew in the job. One Labor Member maintained that "if the Honourable Member for Dalby was born a Speaker, then ever since the beginning of time did Nature perpetuate such a freak". But Bell's neutrality, in more senses of the word than its first definition, consolidated his reputation as a reasonable political referee during this Indian Summer of Queensland conservatism.<sup>40</sup> The fulsome tributes that were paid to him on his death reflected this. In reality he had already run his race and by 1911, however considerable his personal qualities, he was nothing more than a worthy Downs State politician who was "all dressed up with nowhere to go".

## FOOTNOTES

1. This article is an expanded version of the entry by the author in Nairn, B. and Serle, G. (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7: 1891-1939, Melbourne, 1979, p. 258.
2. See obituary notices in: *Brisbane Courier*, 11 March 1911, p. 4; *Darling Downs Gazette*, 11 March 1911, p. 4; *Queensland Times*, 11 March 1911, p. 14; *Queenslander*, 18 March 1911, pp. 22-23; *Truth*, 12 March 1911 and *Queensland Parliamentary Debates* (subseq. *QPD*), 108 (1911-12), pp. 2-22. Family information and contemporary rumour has suggested that Bell's death was the result of the last tragicomical episode in his career. Such a supposition is unable to be proved at this time.

3. Trevelyan, C.P., *Letters from North America and the Pacific, 1898*, London, 1969, p. 182.
4. Routley, G.H., 'Old Jimbour and the Darling Downs, I and II', *Bulletin*, 31 December 1952, 7 January 1953.
5. See *Bell MSS*, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.
6. Rowbotham, David (ed.), 'Old Jimbour Characters', *Bulletin*, 25 March 1953, p. 13.
7. *QPD*, 78 (1895), p. 483.
8. *Ibid.*, 7 (1894), pp. 277-79. Indeed Bell had represented the Darling Downs & Western Land Company in the Darling Downs Pastoralists' negotiations during the famous Jondaryan strike of 1890. *Worker*, May 1890 (Special Edition).
9. *QPD*, 70 (1893), p. 743.
10. *Ibid.*, 76 (1896), p. 1790.
11. *Ibid.*, 75 (1896), p. 237.
12. *Ibid.*, 77 (1897), p. 197.
13. *Ibid.*, 70 (1893), pp. 411-12.
14. *Ibid.*, 71 (1894), p. 736.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
16. *Ibid.*, 72 (1894), pp. 811-12.
17. *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland*, 'Royal Commission on Land Settlement', III, 1897, CA23.
18. *Statistical Register of Queensland*, Brisbane, 1902.
19. *Bell MSS*, 13, 21, 23 April 1893.
20. For description, see: Routley, G.H. *op. cit.*, 7 Jan 1953; Russell, C.W., *Jimbour - Its History and Development 1840-1953*, Brisbane, 1955.
21. Trevelyan, *op. cit.*
22. Camm, J.C.R., 'The Queensland Agricultural Land Purchase Act 1894 and Rural Settlement: A Case Study of Jimbour', *Australian Geographer*, X, 4, September 1967, pp. 263-74.
23. *Toowoomba Chronicle* (subseq. *TC*), 28 January 1908, p. 7, 1 February 1908, pp. 3-4; *Brisbane Courier*, 14 February 1902, 11 March 1902, p. 3, 15 January 1908.
24. French, M., *A Century of Homemaking. A History of the Toowoomba Permanent Building Society 1875-1979*, Toowoomba, 1979, pp. 51-53. Refer also to statistical information derived from fn. 27 (below.).
25. Rudd, Steele, *On Emu Creek*, St Lucia (new edition), 1972, p. 172; *On Our Selection*, Sydney (new edition), 1961, p. 6.
26. 'Census of 1891', *Queensland Votes and Proceedings* (1892), Vol. III, Tables XVII and XXXI; *ibid.*, 'Census of 1901' (1902), Vol. II, Tables XX and XXII; *ibid.*, 'Census of 1911' (1912), Vol. II, Tables I and IX. I am indebted to Joan Kent for extracting statistical information.

27. *Ibid.* Little modern historical work exists for agricultural Australia in this period but see: Camm, J.C.R., 'The development of the rural landscape and economy on the Darling Downs, Queensland, 1885-1915', *unpublished PhD thesis*, University of Newcastle, 1972; Powell, J.M. and Williams, M. (eds), *Australian Space*, Australian Times, Melbourne, 1975; Powell, J.M., *Environmental Management in Australia, 1788-1914*, Melbourne, 1976, pp. 100-111; Friedmann, Harriet, 'Simple Commodity Production and Wage Labour in the American Plains', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 6, 1 (October 1978), pp. 71-100.
28. Waterson, D.B., *Squatter, Selector and Storekeeper, A History of the Darling Downs, 1859-1893*, Sydney, 1968, pp. 225-232; Fitzhardinge, L.F. (ed.), *Nation Building in Australia. The Life and Work of Sir Littleton Ernest Groom*, Sydney, 1941, pp. 16-25; Cameron, M., 'W.H. Groom, Agrarian Liberal', unpublished thesis, University of Queensland, 1968.
29. *TC*, 24 August 1901, p. 1.
30. Fitzhardinge, *op. cit.*
31. *Deakin Papers*, 'Evans to Deakin 24.8.01', NLA MS1540, Item 1491. Quoted in: Carment, D.S., 'Australian Liberal: A Political Biography of Sir Littleton Groom, 1867-1936', unpublished PhD thesis, ANU, 1976, p. 23.
32. *TC*, 31 August 1901, p. 23, 7 September 1901, p. 3.
33. *Ibid.*, 10, 12 September 1901.
34. *Ibid.*, 14 September 1901, p. 3.
35. *Ibid.*, 27 August 1901, p. 3.
36. *Ibid.*, 19 September 1901, p. 3.
37. See the profiles of Bell in: Bernays, C.A. *Queensland Politics during Sixty Years*, Brisbane, n.d. [1919] pp. 142-43; *Brisbane Courier*, 1 April 1907, p. 10.
38. *QPD*, 101 (1908), pp. 103-03; 364-65, 619. By January 1906 Bell had already stiffened the Cabinet to accept Kidston as Premier rather than Denham. *Bell MSS*, J.T. Bell to Colin Bell, 19 January 1906.
39. *QPD*, 102 (1908), pp. 39-40, 51, 71, 88-90.
40. *Ibid.*, 104 (1909), pp. 2-6. For the frank contemporary parliamentary panegyrics see *ibid.*, 108 (1911-12), pp. 2-22.