

## WALTER H. COOPER

(1842-1880) Walter H. Cooper started his professional career as a journalist during the late-1860s and in 1868 wrote one of his most acclaimed dramas, *Colonial Experience*. His other works from this period included two pantomimes, *The History of Kodadad and His Brothers* (1866) and *Harlequin Little Jack Horner* (1868), along with several sensation dramas, notably *Sun and Shadow* (1870), and at least one farce. Cooper's last few years were filled with turmoil and controversy which may well have contributed to his early death in 1880.

The first Australian writer of sensation drama, ahead of [George Darrell](#) and [Alfred Dampier](#), Walter Hampson Cooper was born at Liverpool, west of Sydney on 6 July 1842. The son of Joshua Cooper and his wife Anne Jane Drummond (née Thompson), he worked at a variety of occupations in his short life, and also unsuccessfully attempted to enter politics on two occasions. An outstanding shorthand writer, his early career saw him employed as a journalist with the *Queensland Guardian*. He later took up a position as parliamentary reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1866) and later moved to Melbourne to work for the *Argus* in Melbourne for a short period. In 1871 he returned to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

In the late-1860s Cooper turned his hand to writing for the stage. Arguably his most successful play, the melodrama, *Colonial Experience*, was produced in 1868. Some of the other theatre works Cooper wrote and which were staged during the 1860s and early 1870s include the extravaganza, *The History of Kodadad and His Brothers* (1866),<sup>1</sup> the pantomime, *Harlequin Little Jack Horner* (1868); a farce titled *The New Crime; Or, 'Andsome 'Eney's Mare's Nest* (1868); the sensation dramas *Sun and Shadow* (1870), *Foiled* (1871), *Hazard; Or, Pearce Dyceton's Crime* (1872); and the tragedy, *Rugantino the Ruthless* (1872).

Cooper's interest in politics led to his acquaintance with Henry Parkes, and in 1872 he found himself acting as the politician's agent in both the Tamworth and Liverpool Plains electorates. The following year he was appointed secretary to the Public Charities Commission. Cooper's desire to enter politics was thwarted soon afterwards, however, when his exuberance and forthright opinions put him offside with a number of sitting members. Although dissuaded by Parkes from contesting a seat in East Sydney during the 1874 elections, he nevertheless made a failed attempt in the Lower Hunter region. Despite this setback, Cooper continued to make important contributions to political debates over the next few years through his insightful analyses - published in both newspapers and private pamphlets. In 1874 he travelled to America hoping to have his plays produced there. When this did not eventuate he returned to Australia and set his sights on entering the legal profession. Supported financially by Parkes, he was admitted to the bar in 1875 but found himself in dire financial straits for sometime afterwards, unable even to repay his benefactor. Not surprisingly his relationship with Parkes deteriorated as a result. Although managing to maintain his political momentum by becoming vice-president of the protectionist Political Reform League and a leading activist in the anti-Chinese agitation movement, within a few years his tangled domestic affairs had begun to impose a strain on both his career and personal judgment.

By 1877 Cooper had managed to pay some of his debts off but his decision two years later to leave his wife led to a bitter family dispute. At one point a fight ensued between him and his brother-in-law. The *Evening News* described the scuffle that eventuated, reporting that a gun had been fired. Although Cooper was not injured, the woman with whom he was having an affair was apparently grazed in the arm.<sup>2</sup> Cooper shortly afterwards assaulted J.H. Heaton, which led to his own arrest and a £10 fine and bond. With his personal situation on a downward spiral Cooper found himself destitute within a year, and was forced to sell his possessions, including all his books. Writing to Parkes for help, he indicated that his life had been a bitter struggle against adversity all the more potent "because my own hand guided its weapons and poverty, humiliation and friendlessness were my companions."<sup>3</sup> Walter Cooper died shortly afterwards at Point Piper on 26 July 1880 from a combination of heart disease, haemorrhage and exhaustion. An obituary published

**PRINCE OF WALES OPERA HOUSE.**  
**GRAND CHRISTMAS COMIC PANTOMIME.**

In order to give every effect to this magnificent production an engagement has been effected with the celebrated Pantomimists

**FRAULEIN FANNY, and the LEOPOLD BROTHERS.**  
who will appear in the Harlequinade.

Harlequin.....Mr. H. LEOPOLD  
Columbine.....Fraulein FANNIE  
Pantaloon.....Mr. G. LEOPOLD  
Clown.....Mr. T. LEOPOLD  
Juvenile Clown, &c., &c.....ALBERT LEOPOLD  
Dancer and Pantomimist.....BLANCHE LEOPOLD

During the opening of the Pantomime a GRAND BALLET D'ACTION. The Premier Danseuse, FRAULEIN FANNIE and 24 CORPS DE BALLET.

N.B.—This Ballet takes place in a most picturesque and fairy-like scene, painted expressly by Mr. A. Torning, called the

**DELL OF THE SILVER FERNS.**  
The Dresses of the Fairies will represent our Christmas and National Emblems, including the Holly, Ivy, Mistletoe, the Rose, the Shamrock and the Thistle, Australian Wild Flowers, &c., the whole forming a most beautiful and elegant picture, in fact a

**GROUP OF ANIMATED FLOWERS.**  
The vocal music of the opening will include several of the new airs now so popular in London, including the Sward Song from the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein, Pal O'Mine, Un Ballo, Victorine, Orpheus Galop, Rigoletto, Nigger Breakdowns, New Madley Overture, &c.

**NEW LOCAL SONG, BY LITTLE JACK HORNER.**

*Sydney Morning Herald 24 Dec. 1868, 8.*

<sup>1</sup> *Kodadad* was published in Brisbane in 1866 but not staged before the public until the following year.

<sup>2</sup> "The Walter Cooper Shooting Case." *Evening News* (Sydney) 15 Feb. 1879, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Bede Nairn, 455.

in the *Sydney Morning Herald* two days later suggested that he lacked the personal qualities that would have enabled his undoubted brilliance to shine consistently. His body is interred at the Waverly Cemetery. His headstone identifies him as a "Barrister-at-Law."

Cooper left behind his wife, Ellen, and his six children (five sons and one daughter). One of his last plays to be staged during his life, *Fuss; Or, A Tale of the Exhibition*, is believed to have been written a year or two previously. Staged at the Victoria Theatre (Sydney) in April 1880, this three act comedy shows Cooper's insight into human psychology at its best, as he delineates the characteristics of the various nationalities represented at the International Exhibition.

### MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

**1866:** *The History of Kodadad and His Brothers* [extravaganza]

**1868:** *Harlequin Little Jack Horner* [pantomime]

### FURTHER REFERENCE

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