

## A SOLID CITIZEN

Henry Collings, the author of "Seventy Years of my Life's Experience", was a man of some importance in the little Wollongong of his day. He was also, on his own showing a pattern of the Victorian "self-made man", who from the humblest beginnings had by hard work, thrift, and honesty in all his dealings raised himself to gain reasonable financial comfort, the respect of his neighbours, and a position from which he could look back - not without some degree of complacency - on a well - spent life.

He was born at Erringden in Yorkshire in 1850, at the worst period of the Industrial Revolution. His formal education ended when he was eight. He was married before he was twenty to Ann (Nancy) Lonsdale. After seven more

years' struggle he and Ann decided, not surprisingly, that there was very little future for them in nineteenth-century industrial England. With their children, they sailed from Portsmouth in the square-rigger "Lochee" on 19th November 1877, reached Sydney just over four months later, and transferred immediately to the coastal steamer which took them to Wollongong.

At that particular time the only place in Australia of which the average Englishman had heard was Wagga Wagga (pronounced as in Tailwaggers Club).(2) But on the voyage out, some con man had given Henry a very rosy picture of Wollongong and its industrial growth of Wollongong and the bright future which awaited anyone who settled there. So to Wollongong the Collings family came. Henry's confidence was somewhat shaken when, after arriving at 4.30 a.m., the family's luggage was "put ashore in the sand banks", and he "had to a-hunting for the town called Wollongong". When found, "it was in what I would call a primitive state. It could hardly be called a town in the true sense of the word". However, there he was and he made the best of it. He was fortunate in being befriended by several of the townsfolk - total strangers to him. He got a job in the Mount Keira mine, but before long had started business on his own account as "a painter, grainer and signwriter, in fact anything in the house decorating line". The con man had done him a good turn; and, it is only fair to say, had done Wollongong a good turn also.

Henry Collings started with no advantages. His parents were poor. His father was evidently too fond of the bottle, and a rolling stone who never stayed long in any job. Henry's formal education, such as it was, ended when at the age of eight he went to work in a cotton factory. At the age of ten or thereabouts he was working in an ironstone mine. But he obviously did a good job on his self-education.

He had been married before he was twenty, starting married life "without a penny". This marriage turned out most happy and fortunate. Though Henry and his Nancy had worries and sorrows, including the loss of several children in infancy or childhood, and of their youngest son in the first World War, they never had cause to their rash and imprudent marriage, which lasted fifty-five years, to Ann's death in 1925.

Henry's business prospered. On his own showing he was in a modest way the embodiment of the "Protestant work ethic", the self-made man so dear to the writers of those improving and indescribably tedious Victorian books for the young, whose heroes rose early, worked hard and late, used their brief leisure to improve themselves, drank little (or better still, nothing), sowed no wild oats and wasted no substance in riotous living. That he attained, if not wealth, at least comfortable circumstances, he (while properly thankful to Divine Providence) as no more than his due reward. He scorned those working men who sheltered behind trade unions and "co-opism".

A pillar of the Wesleyan Church, Henry was choir master for many years. His reputation as a choir master and composer extended far beyond Wesleyan circles and the bounds of Illawarra. He was an alderman of Wollongong Council from 1902-1905 and 1911-1913; but his comment on this was, "My Aldermanic experiences cost me a good deal of my time - not much pleasure but plenty of annoyance.

As a human document the autobiography is interesting for Henry's self-revelation: very conscious of his own reclusiveness as a businessman, a citizen, a

husband and father, and a Christian; and not altogether without justification. In theory he was a hard man, with little sympathy for sinners, prodigals and those left behind in the race. One suspects, though, that his practice was less rigorous than his theory, and that his hand was sometimes in his pocket to help some undeserving no-hoper.

Such people as Henry and Ann Collings contributed a great deal to the making of Australia. There was no glamour about their lives; they were no doubt narrow-minded, but what they professed most of them sincerely believed and acted up to. They were in truth solid citizens, and probably would have desired no better epitaph.

[For price, availability etc. see note in December 1986 Bulletin Page 75]

(2)

Wagga Wagga owed its celebrity to Arthur Orton, the Wagga butcher whose claim to the Tichborne title and estates resulted in probably the most sustained marathon in English legal history.