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## **Robert Arthur Broinowski: Clerk of the Senate, Poet, Environmentalist, Broadcaster**

*Richard Broinowski*

**B**ORN IN MELBOURNE on 1 December 1877, Robert Arthur Broinowski was the sixth of eight children of a Polish refugee, Gracjusz Josef Broinowski, and his wife, Jane Smith, the daughter of an English whaling ship captain. In Australia, Gracjusz became a prominent explorer and artist and teacher, whose speciality was Australian mammals and birds. He was a friend of Adam Lindsay Gordon and Edmund Barton. From all accounts, he identified strongly with his adopted home and its unification in Federation, and he passed his values and his intellectual curiosity onto his children. As his son Robert wrote to a friend in 1924, ‘my father was a Pole, whose life was full of interest, who was a man of culture and wide knowledge, and who encouraged me to pursue the things that really matter’.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Broinowski was only four when his father moved from Melbourne to Sydney in 1880. Most of his brothers were educated at the new Jesuit school of St Ignatius at Riverview, but after attending Milson’s Point Primary School, he was sent to another newly-established Jesuit school, St Aloysius, first situated in Woolloomooloo, then in Surry Hills. Many teachers at St Aloysius had no degree or educational qualifications, or the skills to communicate with pupils. Harsh physical punishment was rife. Yet Broinowski came through with a solid educational grounding, although not with any religious convictions. He seems to have remained free of these throughout his life.

Two recollections of Broinowski’s youth in Sydney showed his love of historical events, and encouraged his growing vocation for public service. One was the parade he witnessed in 1885 outside his father’s front door in Macquarie Street, of the New South Wales contingent marching off to the Sudan War—‘The Soudan Contingent’. The other was his participation as a spectator in the ceremony in Sydney’s Centennial Park on 1 January 1901 when the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7.

Governor General declared Australia a Commonwealth. Both were described in detail in ABC Radio broadcasts he made following his retirement.

Broinowski's first job, obtained without university education, but with the help of his father's friend Edmund Barton, was as a clerk in the fledgling Department of Defence in Melbourne. He joined on 10 February 1902, and remained until 24 January 1907, when he became Private Secretary to the Minister of Defence, T.T. Ewing. He served as Private Secretary for four years—to Ewing, and then to his two successors Sir Joseph Cook and Sir George Foster Pearce (the latter for two periods—in the first Fisher Ministry from November 1908 to June 1909, and in the second Fisher Ministry in 1910 and 1911). He accompanied his ministers, especially Senator Pearce, on many of their travels in Australia, including going with Pearce to greet the first RAN vessels, the torpedo-boat destroyers *Yarra* and *Parramatta*, on their arrival in Perth from England. Broinowski also wrote speeches and press releases. For Pearce, he always carried in his luggage the current Commonwealth Year Book and latest Hansards. Armed with Broinowski's research, Pearce felt he could handle any press query or win any argument in the Senate.<sup>2</sup>

On 1 March 1911, Broinowski resigned from Sir George Pearce's office and was appointed to the staff of the Senate as a clerk and shorthand writer.

Federal Parliament had by now been in the Victorian Parliament House in Spring Street, Melbourne for ten years since Federation. During this period, the first eight federal ministries (those of Barton, Deakin, Watson, Reid/McLean, Deakin, Fisher, Deakin and Fisher again) had put together fundamental legislation to run the new Commonwealth, and procedures to make the nascent Parliament work. And for the first time since Federation, a ministry, the second Fisher ministry, enjoyed majorities in both Houses, and thus the strength to push through more legislation.

Broinowski joined a group of 53 parliamentary staff, divided between five departments—those of the Senate, the House, the Library, Hansard, and the Joint House (responsible for amenities and catering). The principal characteristics of the parliamentary bureaucracy were, and remained throughout Broinowski's time, order, respect for the status quo, a measured progression through the hierarchy, and a heavy emphasis on the importance of apprenticeship. Promotion depended on seniority and knowledge of parliamentary practice, which had nowhere been written down. The powers of the two Clerks of the Houses were significant, due to their ability to influence members and senators through the advice they gave.

Broinowski's career, as a committed parliamentary man, reflected these traits. From shorthand writer he was promoted to Clerk of Papers on 1 July 1915, and then to Usher of the Black Rod, Clerk of Committees and Accountant of the Senate on 28 August 1920. At the beginning of May 1927, Robert moved from Melbourne with all other parliamentary staff to Canberra when Parliament was relocated there, and was present in his capacity as Usher of the Black Rod for the opening of the new Parliament House by the Duke of York on 9th of that month. From 30 December 1930 until 31 December 1938 he was Clerk Assistant and Secretary of the Joint House Department, and from 1 January 1939 until his retirement on 30

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Heydon, *Quiet Decision: a Study of George Foster Pearce*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1965.

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November 1942, Clerk of the Senate. As Clerk of Committees, he acted as secretary to a number of select committees, one of the most important of which, under the chairmanship of Senator R.D. Elliott, inquired into the whole parliamentary committee system and its value.

Although there is little on the record about his concrete achievements in procedural matters, there is much anecdotal evidence that in all these capacities, Broinowski was efficient and effective. He had many friends among parliamentarians, and was respected as a man of sound judgment and erudition. His advice was often sought on matters substantial as well as procedural. On matters of protocol, he was also accomplished.<sup>3</sup> But Broinowski was also conscious that his position as adviser, helper and enabler to parliamentarians was sensitive, to be handled always with discretion. He tried not to be in the spotlight. As he wrote to a literary friend, Kate Baker, on 5 September 1917, ‘in the corner where I am, a man must keep out of politics, although he is surrounded by them. I may stand in the centre of the merry go round, but I must never ever ride on the horses.’<sup>4</sup>

He also had the reputation of being a fierce defender of Senate dignity and procedure. He was, as Gavin Souter described him in *Acts of Parliament*, ‘a stickler about formality and propriety ... a quirky amalgam of sophistication, erudition and severity ... [who] did not shrink from such unpopular decisions as banning poppy-sellers from the precincts on Remembrance Day, and stopping parliamentary staff from playing ping-pong’, inspiring C.J. Dennis, in 1930, to write of him the following verse:

Oh, his brows were wreathed with thunder  
as he gazed in stupid wonder,  
As he heard the sinful pinging and the  
sacrilegious pong.  
And he said, ‘Henceforth I ban it. If I  
knew who ’twas began it  
I would have him drawn and quartered,  
for ’tis obviously wrong.’  
Then back adown the corridors, unbending  
as a god,  
Went the adamantine Usher of the Big  
Black Rod.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As secretary to Defence ministers, Broinowski had been required to handle visits by senior visitors and ships. He made all the arrangements, for example, to receive Australia’s first RAN units in Perth, *Parramatta* and *Yarra*. He carried this experience into Parliament, and looked after the Duchess of York at the opening of the new Parliament buildings in 1927. He was also responsible for all arrangements for a visit to Canberra of the Duke of Gloucester in 1934.

<sup>4</sup> Broinowski Papers, MS 599, National Library of Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1988, p. 262.

Another portrait of him, this time as Clerk, came from the pen of *Daily Telegraph* journalist Richard Hughes, in an article following the Senate's disallowance in June 1942 of a regulation permitting the sale of beef from the Werribee Sewerage farm in Victoria. Headed 'Those meddlesome old men of the Senate', the article called the Senate 'a comfortable Home for Old Men', whose real ruler was not the President 'with his verandah of rare hair which sheltered his forehead in mute protest against the absence of a wig', but the Clerk, Broinowski, who was described as 'a thin querulous fellow, with a beaky nose, light, angry eyebrows, and a small wig. He hisses acid instructions and advice to the timid senators like a bad-tempered stage prompter.' As a result of the article, Hughes and four other Consolidated Press journalists were banned from Parliament House for several months.<sup>6</sup>

As Clerk, Broinowski narrowly failed to defend the dignity of Parliament by having another journalist banned, a photographer from the *Daily Telegraph*, for hiring an elephant from a local circus and snapping it with its head inside the entrance of Parliament House with the caption 'An elephant looks at a White Elephant'. This time the journalist was saved by the sense of humour of the President of the Senate, Sir Walter Kingsmill, who let him off with a warning over a whisky.

There is no doubt about Broinowski's considerable physical presence. Rupert Loof, his successor but one as Clerk of the Senate, remembers the fine, tall figure he cut in his black trousers and gaiters and lace as Usher of the Black Rod, leading the procession from the House of Representatives into the Senate on 9 May 1927, when the Duke of York opened the new Parliament House in Canberra.

But there are two other areas where Broinowski made a significant contribution to Parliament, and the growth of Canberra as the federal capital. One was the national attention he helped focus on Canberra through the development of a rose garden during the Great Depression. The other was to dissuade the architects of Canberra from building a national library in the grounds of Parliament House.

From the laying of the foundation stone for Canberra on 12 March 1913, bureaucratic infighting, inertia and controversy impeded growth of the national capital. Walter Burley Griffin was almost constantly involved in jurisdictional battles with officials. The First World War caused cancellation of a design competition for the new Parliament House, and delay in its construction and completion. The Depression caused federal budgets to be cut and several major building projects to be shelved. From 1929 on, there was a drastic slowdown of public servant transfers from Melbourne, and residential and commercial leases were abandoned. The miseries and harshness of Canberra, 'the bush capital'—small, pokey houses, inadequate transport, few amenities, red dust, sharp winds, unsealed roads and footpaths, millions of blow flies from the surrounding sheep country—were as yet not alleviated by development. Australians outside Canberra were trapped in their own Depression miseries, and had no thought, sympathy or support for the national capital or its growth, or Australia's new Parliament.

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<sup>6</sup> G.S. Reid and Martyn Forrest, *Australia's Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1988*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1989, p. 440.

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In 1931, as Secretary of the Joint House Department, Broinowski initiated a national buying campaign of roses to beautify the barren paddocks on both sides of Parliament House. Tennis courts (initially on the Senate side), and a bowling green and courts (on the House side) had been constructed in 1927, but nothing else.<sup>7</sup> Supported by the President of the Senate, Sir Walter Kingsmill, Broinowski first approached the National Rose Society of NSW, which got a Mr Rex Hazlewood, who had a rose and tree business, to prepare designs. In late June 1932, Broinowski wrote to national rose societies in Victoria and South Australia, and prominent rose growers in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, for contributions and support.

In 1933, Broinowski broadened his search for potential donors to the Brisbane City Council, Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Company (Aust) Ltd, OR Ltd (who made Kia-ora fruit juices), North Sydney Council and the NRMA. Individuals were invited to buy a rose bush and have it planted in Canberra for one shilling and fourpence. Staff and journalists at Parliament House were carried along by Broinowski's enthusiasm and also contributed. On the House side, in 1933, he persuaded Dame Mary Hughes, Dame Enid Lyons, Lady Gullett and other parliamentary wives to contribute to a 'Ladies Rose Garden'. In 1937, roses were planted in the House side garden in memory of Captain John Macarthur, founder of the merino wool industry in Australia. Signs denoting contributors were erected beside plants (most have now regrettably disappeared, although the Macarthur sign is still among the few that survive).

In 1935, Broinowski invited the Japanese trading company Mitsubishi Shoji Kaisha in Sydney to contribute, and they responded with 100 Japanese lily bulbs. Bulbs from Holland, and later from Britain, were also sent. Broinowski also initiated tree plantings in the gardens, including donations from Canada and the United States. As they matured and flourished, the gardens were regularly used for formal events associated with the Parliament as well as the recreation of senators and members. One parliamentarian set up his bee hives there.

Broinowski's other contribution was to resist successfully an early plan by Cabinet, conceived in December 1933, to erect the new National Library in the Senate gardens. The decision became public, almost certainly through intervention by Broinowski. In its report, the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote: 'The site is at present occupied by a part of the national rose garden, for which gifts of roses have been sent from all parts of Australia, and by the Parliamentary tennis courts and cricket pitches.'<sup>8</sup> Acting with speed through the Christmas-New Year period, Broinowski enlisted the support of Sir Walter Kingsmill as Chairman of the Joint House Committee to appeal to the Prime Minister, J.A. Lyons, against the decision. The appeal succeeded and the scheme was dropped. Had it proceeded, it may have inhibited the development of the National Library as a separate entity independent from Parliament. The Library was constructed instead in King's Avenue, and moved in the 1960s to its permanent location beside Lake Burley Griffin near Commonwealth Avenue Bridge.<sup>9</sup>

Broinowski retired as Clerk of the Senate on 30 November 1942. This was noted with

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<sup>7</sup> A full account of the history of the gardens at Parliament House and attempts to restore them is contained in *Restoration of Old Parliament House Gardens* written by John Gray, a consultant in Canberra, and published in May 1994.

<sup>8</sup> John Gray's report, para 3.4.

<sup>9</sup> The National Library was separated from the Parliamentary Library by the National Library Act of 1960, and in 1968 the National Librarian, H.L. White, and his staff moved the library into its new home.

speeches in Parliament and motions of appreciation. On 22 August 1950, Senator John McCallum wrote to the Minister for Fuel, Shipping and Transport Senator G. McLeay pointing out that, just prior to Broinowski's retirement, the then President of the Senate, Senator J.B. Hayes, intended to recommend him for a decoration, but Hayes had ceased to be President before he could do so, and had been succeeded by Senator Cunningham. Cunningham had made a verbal recommendation to the then Prime Minister Mr Curtin that Broinowski get a C.M.G., but Curtin had explained that it would be against the policy of the Labor Government to do this. On 30 August 1950, McLeay appealed to the new Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, who said 'the matter would be taken into consideration when the question of Honours is under review'. Perhaps it was considered, but there is no record available of these considerations, and Broinowski never got his decoration.<sup>10</sup>

Broinowski's non-parliamentary life was diverse and somewhat complicated. While in Melbourne he had married Grace Creed (Daisy) Evans, a violinist, in 1906. He had two sons by her, Robert and Theo Philip. They were divorced in 1926. On 20 April 1927, just before moving to Canberra for the opening of the new Parliament House, Robert married Kathleen Elizabeth Knell. They had one daughter, Ruth, who later became a senior librarian at the National Library.

Broinowski's main interests were in literature, especially poetry, and in bush walking, and the natural environment. In Melbourne he contributed to the literary magazine *Birth*, and edited *The Spinner* and the poetry page of *Stead's Review*. In this way he became known to a large number of Australian poets, and supported their work.<sup>11</sup> Also in Melbourne, in 1916, Broinowski met and became a friend of the social anthropologist Kaspar Bronislaw Malinowski when the latter was on leave from his work in the Trobriand Islands. The friendship lasted until Malinowski's death in 1942. The two would go bush walking together, and Broinowski developed an interest in anthropology as a result, an interest he pursued during his only trip outside Australia, to New Guinea and Papua with the then President of the Senate, Senator Hayes, in 1939.

Between 1927 and 1942 in Canberra, the bush capital where people had to contrive their own entertainment, Broinowski worked hard for drama, poetry and literature, and sports. He was president of the original Arts and Literature Society, and donated a cup, the Broinowski Cup, for the winner of an annual tennis tournament among public servants. He arranged a similar trophy for hockey players in Canberra.

After retirement, Broinowski and his wife and daughter moved to Sydney, where he became a regular ABC radio broadcaster and a reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He joined the panel on 2CH's *Stump The Experts*. His range of subjects was very wide, including environmental issues, international affairs, anthropology, aboriginal folk-lore and classical mythology. He made records of his poems, some of which were bound in typescript as 'Themes and Songs' (Canberra 1962). He also made records of children's stories and plays for Columbia Records. He was an excellent mimic of animal and bird sounds, and used this skill with great effect in his children's record 'Betty and Byamee the Kangaroo'. In Sydney,

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<sup>10</sup> From papers on Broinowski held in the Australian Archives, Mitchell ACT, series A463/61.

<sup>11</sup> They included Dorothea Mackellar, Zora Cross, Mary Gilmore, Louis Lavater, Furnley Maurice, R.H Croll, Kate Baker, John Shaw Neilson, Marie Pitt and E.A. Vidler.

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as in Canberra, he was a prominent member of Rotary, and a member of various literary societies.

Broinowski died at his Lindfield home on 16 August 1959 at the age of 83. The cause of death was cardio-vascular degeneration and cerebral arteriosclerosis. He was cremated at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium with the Presbyterian Minister the Reverend George Nesbitt officiating. Many tributes were sent, from parliamentarians, organisations such as Rotary, and friends. He was survived by the two sons by his first marriage, and by his second wife and their daughter.