

PROFILE

William George Kett

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It is noteworthy enough that William George Kett was editor of this journal for a remarkable 42 years, from 1920 until his death in 1962, but he was also one of the most prominent leaders of the profession in the first half of last century.

WG Kett was born in Melbourne on 31 July, 1887. His father William Thomas, born in London, was variously a grazier, a photographic supplies retailer and an optician.¹ His mother Jemima Sullivan, nee Clark, was the daughter of a Victorian grazier, William Clark. She was a young widow whose first husband had taken her from Wangaratta in Victoria to Queensland, but he died in 1884, six years after their marriage. She married WG Kett's father in Brisbane in 1886² but the couple apparently moved to Melbourne soon after because William George, their first son, was born in Melbourne the following year.

WG Kett was educated at Caulfield Grammar School and, after completing his schooling, embarked on the study of medicine at The University of Melbourne. He withdrew from his studies because of the death of his father.³ William Thomas died in 1906 at the age of 55. WG Kett then turned his hand to the study of optometry and, as there was no optometry course at the time, he did so with Henri van Heems⁴ who provided private tuition for those desirous of becoming optometrists.

In 1909, aged 22, he moved to Sydney



Dr WG Kett
1887–1962

at the request of Francis Foy, a member of the Mark Foy family that established the Mark Foy Department store in Sydney.^{3,5} There he engaged in the practice of optometry in the Mark Foy emporium where, but for a sojourn in Europe, he practised for the whole of his career.

His younger brother, Cyril Woodforde Kett, was also an optometrist, but Cyril stayed in Melbourne. Cyril was to make his mark in optometry like his brother. He was one of the signatories who established the Victorian College of Optometry in December 1939 and served on the Council of the College for 30 years, from its inception until his death in 1970 at the age of 80.⁶ The Kett brothers clearly valued commitment, serving their profession literally to the end of their days.

After a few years in practice in Sydney,

William Kett decided that he should further his studies in optometry. There was no optometry course in Australia in the early years of the 20th century so further formal study meant a journey to London. There he studied for the optometry examinations of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers. The Worshipful Company already had a long and proud history; it was a City of London Guild founded in 1629 to help stop unscrupulous spectacle makers from '*makinge and utteringe badde and hurtefull wares*' to the prejudice of the subjects of King Charles II.⁷ Although the Guild was active in the 17th century in its inspection and prosecution of spectacle makers who used inferior materials, it was not so diligent for the next 200 years. It was not until 1898 that it devised a syllabus and a system of examinations in optometry.

William Kett successfully completed the examination for his Fellowship of the Company of Spectacle Makers in May 1914.⁸ One of his tutors was Lionel Laurence, then the official instructor for the Worshipful Company, who had published his highly regarded texts in optics in 1908 and his book on visual optics in 1912, books that were standard texts for Australian optometrists into the 1930s. Laurence's books set a high standard: present day students would find them comparable with modern texts on optics, refraction and ocular motility. Kett's later involvement in optometric education and his writings in the Journal he edited show he was well served by his studies in London.

Kett then travelled in France and Germany. He probably did so with his wife because he had married Winifred Jenkins in Sydney in 1913.⁹ However, the beginning of the First World War in August 1914 interrupted the joys of an extended honeymoon in Europe and he returned to Sydney that year.

Kett the educator

Kett joined the NSW Institute of Optometrists in 1915 and being one of few optometrists at the time with formal qualification and, being a man of presence¹⁰ and talent, he was appointed Director of Education of the Institute. He established a part-time course, initially two years in duration but later extended to three years.³ He was chief examiner and some of his examination papers are to be found in the Journal. They were not easy: for example question 10 in the final examination of March 1922¹¹ asks

'State Listing's law and discuss torsions in the human eye'

a question my students found challenging even last year. He was clearly forward looking: in 1926 he advocated slitlamp biomicroscopy with the words

'no suitable text book has been written'¹²... but this should not deter any optometrist from acquiring the hand slit lamp and obtaining all the help of this important method of diagnosis.¹³

In the same year he wrote on gonioscopy concluding that

'the reported results of this new procedure already give promise of it becoming a regular feature of ophthalmic practice ... and must be of interest to optometrists now and in the future.¹⁴

This was giving an early lead: it would be another 30 years before slitlamp biomicroscopy was to be routine in optometric practice and longer before gonioscopy became commonplace.

Kett's practice in a department store for the whole of his career may seem to sit oddly with the leadership role he played in the profession and his aspirations for expanding the profession's educational and technical horizons, expressed so clearly in much of his writing in the Journal he edited. Gerald Westheimer, who

studied optometry in Sydney in the 1940s and subsequently pursued a very distinguished scientific career, comments¹⁵

'even in those days it was a little declassé to practice in a department store. But he made up for it by having a most elegant professional suite with a plush waiting area and several examination rooms with the best equipment.'

Optometrists Association Australia stalwart Brian Layland¹⁶ commented to me

'It was a very professional practice. He used to go abroad regularly and a short time after his return the new equipment would begin to arrive.'

Kett the professional leader

State optometry associations had been established in the early years of the 20th century. NSW optometrists had established a national association, the Australian Optical Association, in 1904, which became the NSW State Association when Queensland formed its own State Association in 1908. State Associations were established in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia over the next few years.

There was recognition of the need for the State Associations to have common aspirations and strategies and in December 1918, just a month after the end of the First World War, a national conference of State Associations was organised. It was held in Melbourne in the Commercial Travellers Club in Flinders Street and lasted four days. Queensland, South Australia, NSW and Victoria were represented. The Tasmanian delegate was expected, but seems to have travelled to Sydney rather than to Melbourne¹⁷ and was never to arrive.

William Kett, then aged 31, was one of the NSW delegates for this first national conference. Discussion at the conference dealt with weighty matters. There was discussion about forming a federated national association, a goal that was achieved in 1920. Kett was later to be National President. Education was on the agenda and the need for improved and uniform standards of education was discussed and Kett was later to be involved in pursuing this goal. There was discussion on the need for legislation to limit the practice of

optometry to those with proper training and Kett was to be very much involved in securing a Registration Act in NSW over the next 12 years.

Kett and the Australian Journal of Optometry

The conference also discussed whether there should be an official national journal. The NSW delegates Kett and Wenborn urged the conference to initiate a Commonwealth Journal of Optometry, but the delegates from the other States were doubtful of its prospects for success.^{17,18} The NSW delegates offered their own State Journal, called *The Optometrist of NSW*, as the national journal and undertook to bear all financial obligations. Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia agreed to this proposal in 1919 and with the March issue of 1919, the NSW journal changed its name to the *Commonwealth Optometrist*.

Kett assumed editorship of the new flagship journal in the next year with issue number 1, 1920. His first editorial¹⁹ marked the first anniversary of the new national journal and proudly asserted that *'during the past year, with its vastly increased interstate circulation, the Commonwealth Optometrist has done more than even the most sanguine amongst us would have hoped, in cementing the interest of the Australian Optometrist and breaking down the isolation which interstate barriers did so much to maintain'*.

He proudly quotes a review of the new journal published in the journal of the British Institute of Ophthalmic Opticians, which says it is a well presented magazine and *'although at present only of acorn growth, it bids fair to become an oak'*.

For the next 42 years, he nurtured the acorn, editing more than 500 issues and writing many of the editorials and the papers that appeared in it.

Kett and the development of optometric education

The discussion at the first national conference on educational standards led to the establishment of an education committee charged with the task of developing a syllabus for a suitable optometry

course. Kett was appointed to this committee, and when the Australian Optometrical Association was formed two years later he became Chairman of its education committee. At the fifth national conference of Australian optometrists, held in Hobart in November 1922, Kett presented a new syllabus for optometric training that was adopted by the conference.²⁰ The syllabus²¹ envisaged a preliminary course that was intended to set the standard for all state registration boards and state associations, and a final course that would qualify those who completed it for fellowship of the AOA. The FAOA course was never implemented but there is no doubt that the syllabus influenced the content and standard of the various state association courses.

Kett was a speech maker, although Wright¹⁷ observes that some felt he pontificated. At the first conference in 1918, he spoke on professional and ethical standards and was dismissive of British standards. The verbatim record of his lecture to the conference on dispensing and notation standards at that conference covered 17 pages. On the second day of the conference, he spoke on education and Wright notes that he

'took charge again with a lecture on uniform results, by uniform teaching of uniform methods'.

On the third day, according to Wright's account, Kett said

'he had got the impression that the other delegates had the impression he and [fellow NSW delegate] Wenborn were setting out to run the conference on account of their insatiable thirst for importance',

but he went on to assure the other delegates that

'they [Kett and Wenborn] really only wanted to learn and be helpful but they had gone to a lot of pains to prepare something to talk about'.

At the fifth conference, Wright records that Kett made three speeches at the dinner. One was his own, the others were those of two delegates, who had been rendered incoherent because the President had provided, in deference to the temperance of most delegates, what he thought was a non-alcoholic local cider, but was not.¹⁷

Kett gave an important speech to the Congress of the Association for the Advancement of Science held in Perth in August 1926.²² This was the first occasion on which optometry had found a place at the lecture podium of this prestigious body representing mainstream science. He gave the speech in his capacity of National President of the AOA. It was a most elegant speech,²³ succinctly covering the history of spectacles and the emergence of knowledge about refractive errors in the 19th century. He dilated on the social and economic costs of poor vision and listed the poets, philosophers and composers whose lives were seriously affected by eye problems. He outlined the emergence of optometry and described current training for the profession. He then argued the importance for optometric education to be provided within universities and set out a syllabus for a four-year optometry course.

He was persuasive because on the motion of Professor AD Ross, Professor of Physics at the University of Western Australia, it was agreed that all Australian universities should be requested to provide training in physics to optometry students. Professor Kerr Grant, Professor of Physics in the University of Adelaide, chaired Kett's lecture. A year earlier, he had already arranged for the optometry course of the South Australian Registration Board to be taught within the University of Adelaide.¹⁷ He was already a convert to Kett's message.

Kett and optometric registration

One of the main goals of the profession in the 1920s was securing legislative recognition of the profession. Tasmania was the first to achieve this in 1913 and the year before Queensland had some success with the passing of the sections dealing with optometry in a Medical and other Practitioners Bill. NSW achieved a Registration Act in 1930. Kett was an active participant in the political process²⁴ and outspoken to the press about the matter.²⁵ He is quoted in the Sun on May 18, 1922 as saying the law allowed

'no man to look at an eye of a horse or a cow unless he were qualified, but any humbug could meddle with the human eye'.

He also quoted a country advertisement which read

'Baker, pastrycook, wedding cakes a speciality, consulting optician, eyes examined free, glasses below city prices'.

The newspaper story is headlined 'Legislation wanted. Wedding cake specialist'.

When the Act was passed in NSW, he was appointed a foundation member of the Registration Board and remained a member of it for the next 20 years. William Kett was a stayer.

Kett and the politics of education

Legislative recognition of the profession brought new opportunities to enhance optometric education and in the year following the passing of the optometry Act by the NSW parliament, the Sydney Technical College took responsibility for the NSW optometry course. The course was still part-time, but had been extended to four years. Kett was appointed a part-time teacher in the Sydney Technical College and a member of the STC Optometry Advisory Board.

As a leading figure in optometric education, he became embroiled in the broader politics of technical education. The NSW government had recognised in the 1930s that there was an urgent need for increasing numbers of technologists and applied scientists and it appointed a Commission in 1934 to advise it on the future of technical education in NSW.²⁶ Kett gave evidence to the Commission,³ which subsequently recommended that the Sydney Technical College should become an autonomous institution independent of the State Education Department and, although it considered the idea that such a body should grant degrees, it stopped short of recommending that the STC should have a degree charter.

The Commission's report led to the Technical Education Act of 1940 that would have given autonomy to the technical colleges, but the government fell in the 1941 election and the new Labour government, led by William McKell, who was later to be Governor-General, had bolder and different ideas for technical education. It nullified the 1940 Act and set up a Developmental Council to draft

legislation to convert the Central Technical College in Sydney into an Institute of Technology, granting its own degrees.²⁷

WG Kett was appointed a member of that Council alongside very prominent industrial and public service leaders. It was chaired by the then Minister of Education, Robert Heffron. The Council worked quickly. It enrolled students for degree courses after only seven months of deliberations and a year before the new university was founded. On the advice of the Council, an Act of Incorporation was passed in March 1949 to establish the NSW University of Technology, later to be renamed The University of New South Wales.²⁸

Kett became a member of the Council of the new university when it was founded in 1949 and remained a Councillor for 13 years until his death in 1962, although the University's own records²⁹ credit him with being a councillor for 15 years from the time of his appointment to the Development Council that preceded the formal establishment of the University. He was an active councillor. He was a member of the sub-committee appointed by the University Council to help resolve the problem of the University's autonomy. It was still part of the NSW Department of Technical Education and there was considerable unrest about this. He is also described as the 'vigorous chairman' of the University's library committee, not an easy task because the library was both the library of the Department of Technical Education and the University.³⁰

The optometry course was swept from the Sydney Technical College into the new university, as were many other schools and courses in the STC, and a conversion course for optometry diplomates leading to a degree of the University was offered in 1953. This was the first degree course in optometry in the British Commonwealth of Nations. A four-year full-time degree course was to follow later.

Kett was greatly involved in his profession. He was Editor of this Journal for 42 years. He was a member of the NSW Division of the Optometrists Association and a State President. He served as National Association councillor and was National

President from 1925 to 1927. He was a member of the NSW Optometrists Registration Board for 20 years. He was a part time teacher in the optometry course and a member of the Council of The University of New South Wales.

Did William Kett have life outside of his profession, did he have time for anything else? It seems he did. He was a family man with two daughters. His first wife died in 1933 and he remarried in 1947. He was a staunch churchman, attending the historic St James Anglican church in the city.³ He was as committed to his church as he was to his profession; he was Warden and a trustee in St James and served as a Synod representative, but it seems there was still time to spare. He had time to pursue his literary and intellectual interests as a member of the Royal Australian Historical Society, the Classical Society and the Wildlife Preservation Society. He was also a Director of the Mark Foy Emporium until his death.

He was honoured in his own time for his tireless efforts in the advancement of the intellectual strength of the profession. The University of which he was a founding member conferred on him an honorary Doctorate of Science in 1957. He was, of course, made an honorary life member of the Australian Optometrical Association, but he was also a life member of the American Optometric Association and of the Institute of Ophthalmic Opticians in London.

REFERENCES

1. William George Kett's birth certificate, No. 21727, shows his father's occupation as grazier. His father's death certificate, No. 2555, gives his occupation as optician. Sands and McDougall's Melbourne Directories list him as a photographic materials supplier at 263 Little Collins St Melbourne from 1898. Wise's Victorian Post Office Directory 1888-1894 show that WT Kett was also a post master, a commission agent and a gold broker in Warburton, Victoria, between 1888 and 1897. I am grateful to Kaye Cole who kindly used her genealogical skills to research William Kett's family background.
2. Pioneer Index to NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages 1788-1888.
3. Simon VC. The late Dr WG Kett. *Aust J Optom* 1962; 45: 90-93.
4. Alan Isaacs, a Victorian optometrist who later studied medicine and ophthalmology, tells the story of how his uncle John Langley studied optometry with van Heems. Van Heems arranged for an American organisation to provide a certificate of Doctor of Optics on completion of his course. Langley was issued with a Doctor of Divinity certificate by mistake. Having studied optometry and being Jewish, this certificate did not have much value for him and he asked for the correct certificate. He was told this could be issued on a further payment and that he could keep the Doctorate of Divinity.
5. Francis Foy was probably the eldest son of Mark Foy, an Irishman who came to Australia about 1858 and who set up drapery stores in Castlemaine and Bendigo in Victoria. He then established the Foy and Gibson emporium in Melbourne and in 1885 Mark Foy's emporium in Sydney. Francis Foy was a director of Mark Foy's.
6. Annual reports of the Victorian College of Optometry 1970 and 1989.
7. Champness R. A short history of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers up to the beginning of the twentieth century. London: Apothecaries Hall; 1958.
8. He completed the examinations in May 1914 (Letter from CJ Eldridge, archivist, Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers July 18, 2000). Simon (ref 3) says he gained first place in the FSMC examinations, and while there is no doubting that WG Kett was an erudite man, the archives of the WCSM do not support that claim.
9. Federation Index to NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages 1889-1918.
10. Gerald Westheimer, NSW trained optometrist and later an outstanding vision scientist, describes Kett as the 'most distinguished member of the profession, polished, well-spoken and with an air of culture and achievement'. Personal communication by e-mail, 13 July 2000.
11. Institute of Optometrists NSW. Preliminary and Final examination March 27 1922. (Examiner WG Kett FSMC) *Commonwealth Optom* 1922; 4: 47-48.
12. Which must have been true since those of us who struggled with Doggart's 1949 Ocular Signs in Slit-Lamp Microscopy might have said that there was no adequate text book even in the 1950s.
13. Kett WG. The slit lamp method of diagnosis for optometrists. *Commonwealth Optom* 1926; 8: 429.
14. Kett WG. Gonioscopy. *Commonwealth Optom* 1926; 8: 150.
15. Personal communication by e-mail July 13 2000.
16. Personal communication by e-mail July 19 2000.
17. Wright C. History of Australian Optometry.

- Melbourne: Australian Optometrical Association, 1988.
18. The Commonwealth Optometrist. Its future career. *Commonwealth Optom* 1920; 2: 3.
 19. Kett WG. Our anniversary (editorial). *Commonwealth Optom* 1920; 2: 1.
 20. Fifth interstate conference of Australian optometrists met in Hobart November 20th, 21st, 23rd and 24th. *Commonwealth Optom* 1922; 4: 190-211. See p 190 for Kett's presentation of the education committee report, pp 202-203 for his report and p 197 for a report of the formal adoption of the syllabus.
 21. Australian Optometrical Association. Optometry course. *Commonwealth Optom* 1926; 8: 157-162. This is a reprint of the original booklet.
 22. Australian Association for the Advancement of Science. University courses in optometry. *Commonwealth Optom* 1926; 8: 215.
 23. Kett WG. The training of optometrists. *Commonwealth Optom* 1926; 8: 249-254.
 24. Deputation to the Hon CW Oakes, Minister for Health on 18th May 1822. *Commonwealth Optom* 1922; 8: 75-77.
 25. Press reports of deputation. *Commonwealth Optom* 1922; 8: 77-79.
 26. Willis AH. The University of New South Wales. The Baxter Years. UNSW Press, 1983: p 18.
 27. Willis AH. The University of New South Wales. The Baxter Years. UNSW Press, 1983: pp 21-25.
 28. Willis AH. The University of New South Wales. The Baxter Years. UNSW Press, 1983: pp 25-29. Page 28 has a photograph of the first meeting of the governing council of the University of Technology on July 6 1949 in which WG Kett is seated at the back on the right of the photograph.
 29. University of NSW. Calendar 2000. Former members of Council. Available from URL: <http://www.publications.unsw.edu.au/handbooks/calendar/25.html> [cited 21.6.2000].
 30. Willis AH. The University of New South Wales. The Baxter Years. UNSW Press, 1983: pp 120-129.