

Newham Waterworth 1867-1949

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ABSTRACT A biographical account of Newham Waterworth is presented, documenting in particular his contribution to the profession of optometry and its struggle to achieve legislative recognition in the State of Tasmania.

Keywords *Optometry, legislation, registration, Tasmania*

Newham Waterworth born 1867 was the son of John Gwynir Waterworth, a builder of Scarborough England. In England his first employment was in a warehouse in a dimly lit and poorly ventilated basement where he was required to work hard in harsh conditions. To this and the hard conditions of life generally in England he later attributed his rather high myopia of eight dioptries.

He was determined to rise above these conditions and he never lost the will to advance himself and incidentally to help others who needed assistance.

When he was 19 years old the family moved to Hobart. They were the father, described as a carpenter, the mother a chronic invalid, five sons and a daughter. They had little money and the children received only a very elementary education which did not fit any of them for any trade or profession but they all showed a characteristic of industry and determination.

Newham tried a number of occupations which he hoped by determination would lead on to fortune. He worked as a printer and became an apprentice cutter in a tailor's establishment. He must have studied English literature or at least practised as a writer of English because he became quite competent as a writer and speaker as we shall see.

In 1895, when he was 28 he went to Brisbane. He became interested in hypnosis and 'magnetic healing' and set out to use these medically unacceptable and unorthodox methods to treat nervous disorders and achieved quite a name and reputation in this. He has a son who is a medical practitioner in ophthalmology, a return to orthodoxy.

In 1902 he met Edith Hawker but found her love not easy to win with all his hypnotic magnetism. She was a teacher and was transferred to the country so he had to woo her by writing letters. Making no progress in twelve months he went there and 'by fast talking he got

her off her balance and married her out of hand'. That delightful description is in the words of a son who must have got it second hand of course. The marriage lasted forty-six years and was exceedingly happy and successful. W. G. Kett¹ describes her as an amazingly interesting and accomplished person with a ready pen and delicious wit.

Kett who knew the Waterworths well says they lived about a year in Sydney, then went to Hobart for a holiday and that he studied visual optics under Harry Cole² a successful Sydney practitioner during that year in Sydney. Kett mentioned that in the early years of the twentieth century the ways into optometry were through apprenticeship (usually for the young) and tutorship (usually mature age entrants). So this makes his version more likely than that of Waterworth's son³ who believed his parents went to Hobart on their honeymoon, and guessed that his father (and his uncle, Edward) obtained a somewhat rudimentary knowledge of optometry from itinerants from the mainland. Newham's brother Edward set up in Launceston where he seems to have been deeply obscure.

His wife Edith who had been so slow to fall in love with him fell in love with Hobart instantly. Newham agreed to stay though he had misgivings about success in so small a place. However he was successful as an optometrist and built up a large following by his enterprise and energy aided by such sidelines as offering to sell skeletons of Tasmanian marsupials to the University of Hong Kong, and holding agencies for Troughton and Sims surveying instruments, Stanley tools and Reeves artist's materials.

Newham Waterworth in his practice of optometry set out to acquire the greatest possible skill and knowledge by books and lectures of what we now call continuing education with others in Hobart Town and up to nearly 1930 he was in demand in mainland States as a lecturer and examiner of those wishing to qualify to practice under the various Acts.

Newham Waterworth had many interests. In his youth he became interested in the pipe organ and over a considerable period he worked at building one and the pieces were scattered about his home but it was never finally assembled. However, on the first of five

overseas trips, he purchased in England the first parts of what was to become a fine three manual instrument which is now the pride of a Hobart church. He taught himself to play by ear and at 70 years of age learned to read music.

As a young man in Brisbane he became a Baptist lay preacher and continued this until after his marriage and return to Hobart. However, reading philosophers of the 'free thinker' school he lost his faith and replaced it with a mixture of atheism and spiritualism. This was not apparent to his friends as he always showed a gentle sympathy with their beliefs and views, but he could discuss spiritualism and related subjects with knowledge borne of wide reading and intense thinking.¹

Smoking and alcoholic beverages were abhorrent to him. At the 5th Conference Hobart 1922 he was President and discovered that practically none of his colleagues drank and accordingly ordered some very old vintage cider from the cellars of Kitz for the dinner not knowing that it was the alcoholic variety and potent at that. Kett made three speeches that night, his own and those of two other delegates who were rendered incapable of coherent utterance. As Kett put it, cider could act much more quickly and effectively on abstainers. He was very attached to his friends and loved to visit them, particularly those like Kett who lived interstate with whom he would discuss books — and optometry.

With his wife he travelled widely. They had very wide interests and were intelligent travellers to good purpose and to the infinite entertainment of their friends. Their last voyage was in 1949. Newham Waterworth had a fall on board which seems to have seriously affected his health so that he died a few days after their return at the age of 82, full of years and of honour. He served his day and generation well and his brethren will always be in his debt.

His three sons are engaged in optics, optometry and ophthalmology. Eric, the eldest headed an important optical instrument manufacturing company. He also helped his father to build the organ. Philip Waterworth FBOA, FSMC is the optometrist. He (1949-51) and his father (1922-24) were both National Presidents of the Australian Optometrical Association. David, the youngest practices ophthalmology in Hobart.

Newham Waterworth was described as an ideal husband and father and loved home life. Very close bonds existed between both parents and the sons. Mrs. Waterworth did not believe in homework for children and argued with school masters until her own boys were relieved of that burden. Intellectually and in every way they were living witness of the dispensibility of homework.

He has been described as the father of optometrical legislation in Australia. In this he was fortunate to have established political connections and a considerable political expertise in the ten years or so he lived in Hobart before placing his Bill before the Tasmanian

parliament. It was a private member's Bill which by sheer persistence he had introduced by Joseph Lyons later to be Prime Minister of Australia.

Newham Waterworth's own political activities were in a centrist party with sympathies toward labour interests. At least he often spoke against Tory or Conservative activities which he did in letters to editors in Hobart newspapers. When this party which was called the Liberal Democratic League (this was little '1' liberal no doubt) was formed in Tasmania in 1908 he was its secretary and became its spokesman often quoted in Editorial leaders in the Tasmanian press. He seems to have won the respect of the editors and they gave him a friendly hearing when his Bill came before the parliament about five years later.⁴

By 1913 when the optometric legislation was before the Houses of Parliament he had about 800 column inches of newspaper comment printed: letters, comment, quotation and controversy. He had become well known to the press and the people of Tasmania. What is more important he was respected. Reading all this it is impossible to doubt that he had acquired a considerable mastery of written English. He carefully and neatly clipped all this material and pasted it into his 'Scrap Book'⁵ which is now part of the AOA's history archives.

Newham Waterworth stood as a Labour Party candidate in the electorate of Denison in early 1912 but was not elected. Mrs. Waterworth also stood for parliament and became eligible for a seat upon the death of a member, but being absent from Australia could not be sworn in within the prescribed time.

Kett says that Newham Waterworth became interested in securing optometric legislation to keep out of Tasmanian mainland optical marauders, itinerants of various degrees of incompetence who descended on the island and made it their happy hunting ground. He wished to defend the local practitioners and the public from them.

He drafted a Bill. He had precedents. There were Acts in 27 American States, — commencing with Minnesota in 1901. Within Australia, Bills had been brought before parliaments in New South Wales in 1906 and 1909 and in Queensland in 1911. He made use of these measures to draft a Bill which later was closely followed by Queensland (1917) and South Australia (1920) and which indeed has been a model for all subsequent legislation in Australia.

The Bill was presented in June 1913, was commended by the Premier on behalf of the Government and passed very easily through the lower House of the Parliament: so easily that the editor of the Hobart Examiner of 26 September 1913⁶ said that though he too commended the measure it should receive more careful examination by the Upper House before it became law. His worry was that the ignorant public might consult an optometrist in confusion believing him to be an ophthalmologist. The words in use in 1913 were optician and oculist.

Just before the measure was to be debated in the Upper House the Medical Association sent a letter to each member of that House asking him to use his vote and influence against it, giving a set of reasons.

One of these letters got into Waterworth's hands and he was permitted to make a reply as honorary Secretary on behalf of the Tasmanian Optometrists' Association in the Examiner⁷. It was an open letter to all the Members of Parliament for 7th November 1913. This is beautifully written and should be read in its full length. A very brief summary now follows.

He began by saying what now we still may say: (He prefaced this with: *To avoid any possible misunderstanding*) *That optometry's relations with individual members of the medical profession are of the most cordial character and his comments and criticisms were directed solely against the position taken by their association.*

He said the casual reader of the medical association's letter to the members of the parliament might think their only objections were in matters of detail. Not so. Their Congress had recently resolved: *That no legislation should be introduced which suggested that optometrists should be legally authorised to test vision.* This meant exactly what it said. What the medical association proposed to approve of was a measure for the better education of those wishing to enter the *trade of spectacle making* and that proper introduction in this can be provided by arrangement with technical colleges, and the relationship of these people thus regulated to the ophthalmological profession should be the same as the relationship of the pharmaceutical chemist to the physician. In short what the medical men proposed was to end, not to mend the Bill.

He also said that an honest attempt had been made to frame legislation acceptable to the medical profession to ensure that it would no longer be possible for the most ignorant illiterate and unscrupulous vagabond to pose as an eye specialist and without let, hindrance or the fear of punishment work irreparable harm to the sight of young and old alike. The attitude of the medical association was incomprehensible. It admitted the existence of this evil yet opposed the only practicable and effective remedy and at the same time made the impossible claim that it was acting in the public interest.

He agreed there were optometrical incompetents just as there were medical incompetents in the matter of measuring defects of vision. The difference was that optometrists were moving to weed out those in their ranks whereas the medical profession so far had taken no steps towards preventing medical men who were incompetent to give optical service from misleading the public to the contrary.

He quoted at length from a notable medical authority Dr. G. M. Gould including: *Avarice, desire for success, blunderfulness, lack of a simple good school of optometry . . . have usually made our diagnosis of errors of refraction . . . an utter and amazing farce.* He ended the quotation with these words — still an exact quote of

Gould: *Ophthalmology long vaunted as the most exact of medical sciences, is in truth the most ludicrously inexact.*

Then he said that even if medical men *were* competent they had no right to oppose the legal recognition of non-medical men who gave proof of their competence, as an inquiry of the highest order had reported that optometry is an art or profession wholly distinct from those of medicine or surgery. In this, Waterworth was referring for the first time to the now famous request from the most famous scientist, Lord Kelvin and other famous scientists, and members of parliament to the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers of London for an inquiry into whether it was desirable or not for optometry to be conducted by non-medical practitioners. The Worshipful Company had assembled a Committee of Eminent Scientists and others. Their report that optometry was wholly distinct from medicine and surgery was endorsed by Sir William Brookes, Sir William Honey, Lord Rose and others whose names in science were household words in their lifetimes.

The medical profession had stated that they would propose a prohibition against any person under the age of 40 years being allowed to wear spectacles unless they had first received medical agreement. This left Newham Waterworth almost speechless and he was unable to imagine any legislative assembly in the civilised world which would so legislate.

The medical association objected to the proposal that there be only two of their members on the registration board. Waterworth said they were unnecessary and in view of their attitude to the legislation he questioned whether they were desirable.

This is not meant to be a description of the fight to secure legislation in Tasmania. These paraphrased quotations are included only to show Newham Waterworth's power as a political writer. For other reports see Wright^{8,9}.

Briefly to mention the effect he had on others: the editor of the Examiner⁶ said the letter sent by the doctors was exceedingly difficult to understand and not at all to their credit. Stripped of unnecessary verbiage and trivial objections used to pad out a weak case it contained only two statements: that they were in favour of prohibiting any optometrist however competent from practising and of permitting any character however stupid to ruin eyes without let or hindrance. These he said were untenable statements.

Just when the debate began in the Upper House, just when the doctors had hoped that no one outside the House would be aware of their intervention, the Editor of the Daily Post¹⁰ made his contribution which must be one of the most trenchant criticisms ever made of the honoured profession of medicine. He said that previously he had felt a little unsure, but now further investigation had emphatically confirmed the correctness of the optometrists who moreover had been striving for years and had worked openly had invited the press to their deputations and publicly

advocated their claims. The medical profession by contrast had opposed covertly and secretly, and allowed nothing to be known or published which would throw light on their reasons.

Why, he asked were they silent instead of being at their most eloquent when the proposal was before the Lower House? He concluded it was to bring influence to bear on the Upper House when the advocates of the Bill would be off their guard.

He said the arguments they brought forward were vaguely worded and specious claims not supported by a tittle of evidence while the optometrists had brought forward independent testimony of the most impressive kind: nothing could be more definite specific and convincing.

The editor ended: no other conclusion could be arrived at than that the doctor's case goes by the board and he sincerely regretted that they had taken the stand they did.

Newham Waterworth in this was a man of single minded determination and clear minded logic. He was rewarded by having his Bill pass the Upper House before the year 1913 was ended.

The earliest Minutes of the Registration Board exist. Waterworth was appointed to be its first Registrar a position he held until 1938 when a salaried officer was appointed. The Minutes record how the first chairman an ophthalmologist attempted, but was defeated in an attempt to have optometrists prohibited from using an ophthalmoscope.

Newham Waterworth drafted the regulations. They remain a monument to his sagacity and foresight and they too have been a model for the regulations in other States. One which prohibits an optometrist from being employed by an unregistered person or a company was challenged right up to the High Court without being upset.

He set out to give the fullest protection to Tasmanian optometrists. The regulations are restrictive but they have established an enviably high standard of ethical professional behaviour.

In the year following the passing of his Act he was honoured by his professional brethren with a framed address with photographs of Tasmania's first sixteen registered optometrists. It reads: *Presented to Newham Waterworth Esq. by the first optical graduates in the State of Tasmania as a mark of esteem and appreciation of his great services in securing for the first time in the British Dominions the legal recognition of the Optical Profession and the compulsory examination and registration of all practising optometrists.*

Thanks to Basil Robinson, optometrist of Hobart, a facsimile of this is in the Council Room of the National Office of the Australian Optometrical Association.

W. G. Kett recalled that in 1917, Newham Waterworth took into partnership R. M. Ross who had been with Werners of Melbourne. The partnership was successful although the two men were quite different in temperament.

Waterworth was active in Association affairs. He was President of the Tasmanian Division several times when it was known as the Tasmanian Optical Association and he was National President of the Australian Optometrical Association in 1922 when the Conference was held in Tasmania. In 1946 he was elected Patron and held that honour until he died in 1949.

The American Optometric Association also honoured him: in 1924 it elected him to be a Life Member. It knew him well from his five overseas voyages. Only one other was known to Kett to have been honoured in this way. He does not say who this was. Probably it was W. G. Kett himself.

I will end this Life of Newham Waterworth as Kett did by quoting (an also unnamed person) who said: *He was a man of kindly and warm disposition and universally liked. Never known to do an unpleasant or unkind act, he was charitable in all his thoughts, words, and deeds.*

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