

A Man of the People

Words: Lisa Cugnetto

William Slater knew what it meant to come from humble beginnings and he made it his life's work to help give the working class a fair go. As a director of the Australian Natives' Association from 1923–1960, and founder of Slater & Gordon, few men can boast the fierce integrity that William Slater relentlessly expressed throughout the course of his life.

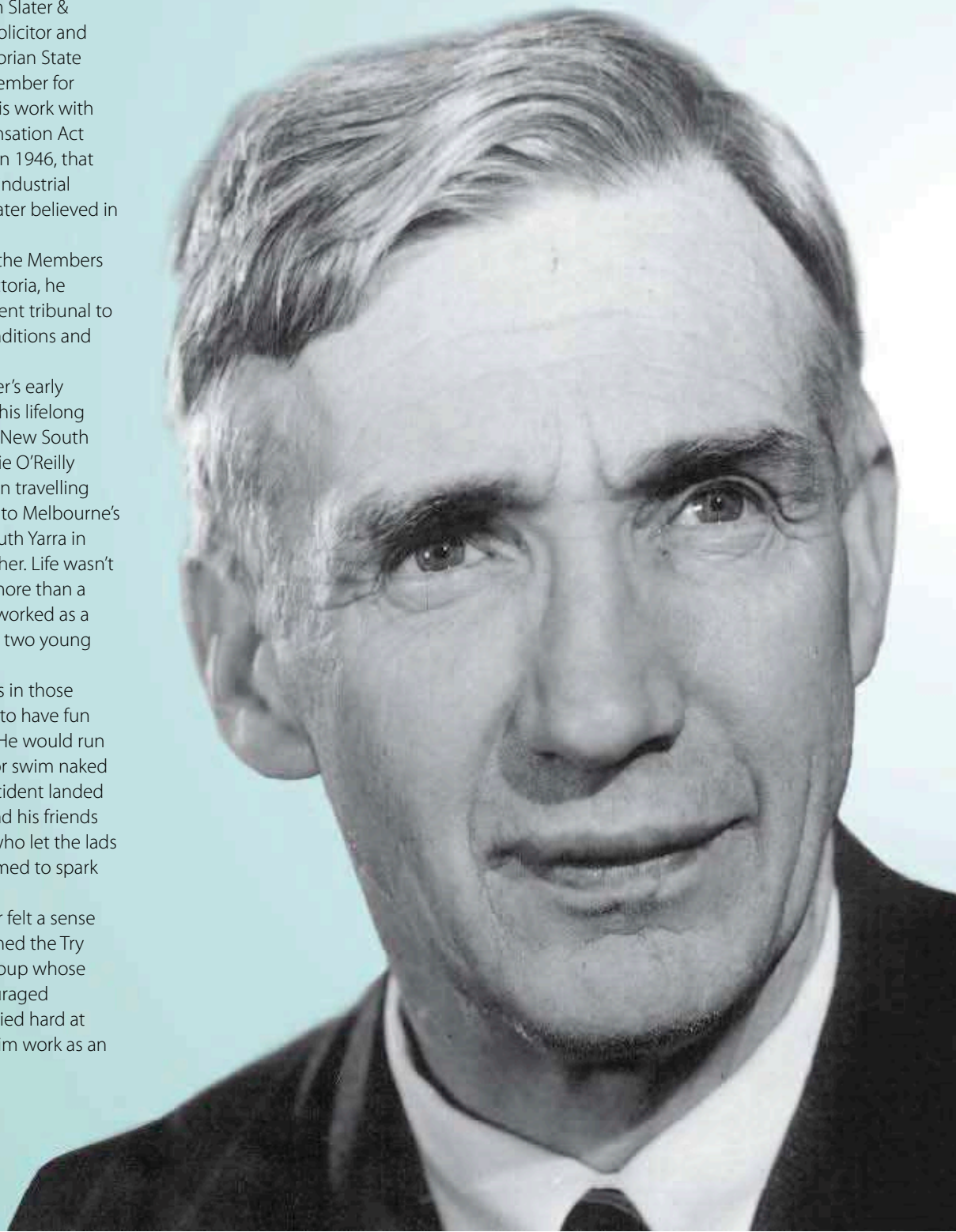
PERHAPS BEST known as one of the founders of Australian law firm Slater & Gordon, William Slater was a solicitor and politician who served the Victorian State Parliament as a Labor Party member for 41 years. A staunch socialist, his work with the Victorian Workers' Compensation Act involved a revision of the Act in 1946, that resulted in the recognition of industrial illnesses such as asbestosis. Slater believed in equal opportunity for all.

As an honorary solicitor for the Members of the Police Association in Victoria, he helped establish an independent tribunal to determine better working conditions and wages for police officers.

There is no doubt that Slater's early struggle in life contributed to his lifelong devotion to socialism. Born in New South Wales on May 20, 1890 to Marie O'Reilly and William Slater, an Irish-born travelling salesman, his family relocated to Melbourne's inner south-east suburb of South Yarra in 1892, after the death of his father. Life wasn't easy for Slater and with little more than a primary school education he worked as a paper-boy to help support his two young sisters and struggling mother.

Known as Billy to his friends in those early years – Slater knew how to have fun in spite of his responsibilities. He would run through the streets barefoot or swim naked in the Yarra River. The latter incident landed a spirited 10-year-old Slater and his friends in court before a magistrate, who let the lads off with a fine, and which seemed to spark Slater's interest in the law.

Even as a young teen Slater felt a sense of social responsibility and joined the Try Boys' Society, a community group whose members cared for and encouraged disadvantaged youth. He studied hard at night and the society found him work as an office boy at a law firm.



It was early in his career that Slater openly shared his liberal views on politics and the law – leaving him open to criticism from conservatives. At 22 he became a law clerk at Percy Parks' Mildura law offices and joined the Australian Labor Party. At party meetings, he was never short on an opinion; his frankness earning him the disregard of some local business leaders who lobbied, but ultimately failed, in their attempts to get him dismissed.

Outside of the office, Slater lived a fit and active life: swimming, playing football and picking fruit on the property that was the base for his fledging but largely unsuccessful fruit-growing business.

Slater lived a fit and active life; swimming [and] playing football

Opposed to bearing arms, Slater served as a World War I stretcher-bearer for the 10th Field Ambulance in France, experiencing the atrocities of war. It wasn't until November 1917, while Slater was in England recovering from an injury, that he made his first real foray into Australian politics. He had been nominated by friends to stand as the Labor representative for the seat of Dundas in the Legislative Assembly, and no-one was more surprised than he when he won.

The years that followed saw Slater's simultaneous legal and political careers prosper steadily. In May 1918 he was diagnosed as a meningitis carrier and declared medically unfit for military service. He returned to Melbourne and began work as a clerk at his good friend Maurice Blackburn's firm.

Blackburn made Slater a junior partner soon after his admission to practice as a solicitor in 1922. The following year he married Mary Gordon, later becoming a father to a daughter and two sons. One of Slater's first clients, enabling him to start his own practice was the Australian Railway Union; years on, he joined his brother-in-law, Hugh Gordon, in founding Slater & Gordon to represent other unions. They represented desperate workers who, following injury at work, were often abandoned by employers, and left without means of support for themselves and their families.

Before long, Slater & Gordon had gained a somewhat controversial reputation as a law firm that voiced the needs of everyday folk, helping them stand up to big corporate entities. Today, the firm continues to represent workers' compensation cases, particularly asbestos-related cases.

Slater's firm was among the first to hire female clerks doing their articles. The firm's partners also disregarded the societal norm of clerks having to pay firms a 'training premium' in order to complete their articles – which meant legal careers were often accessible only to those who could afford it – instead paying the clerks for their work.

A defining moment in Slater's career came when he was elected House Speaker in 1940, many lauding him a fair, reasonable man for the role. Later, he became Australia's first Minister to the Soviet Union. Slater held various roles under Victorian Premier John Cain's ministries across the 1940s and 1950s, including those of Attorney-General, Solicitor-General and various ministerial roles overseeing immigration, prices and electrical undertakings.

Slater was influential in introducing government regulation on gambling and

racing through his drafting of the Trotting Races Bill and, subsequently, the Trotting Control Board.

In later years, when controversy brewed about his political and religious associations and those of some of his firm's staff, Slater simply dismissed it, holding the belief that each individual's affairs were his or her own. He was a stalwart supporter of independent thought and of the concept of people working together towards a common good.

Slater was the man who one-time Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies described as having "a reputation for personal integrity that could scarcely be higher". He died in 1960 from cancer. His funeral saw every intersection from St Kilda to Springvale, where he was to be buried, blocked by members of the Victoria Police so that Slater and his procession could reach his final resting place unhindered. It seemed a fitting farewell to an outstanding Australian. 🗣️

William Slater

1890 Born May 20 in NSW

1892 Arrived in Victoria after father's death

1912 Law clerk in Mildura

1916–1918 WWI Australian Imperial Force, 10th Field Ambulance Stretcher Bearer

1919–1922 Managing Law Clerk for Maurice Blackburn

1922 Admitted to practice as solicitor

1923 Married Mary Gordon

1923–1924 Partnership with Maurice Blackburn

1924, 1927–1932 Attorney-General and Solicitor-General

1926 Chief President Australian Natives Association (merged with Manchester Unity Friendly Society in 1993 to become Australian Unity Friendly Society)

1923–1960 Director Australian Natives Association

1927–1928 Minister of Agriculture

1928–1929 President Law Institute

1929–1932 Minister of Agriculture

1942–1943 First Australian Minister to Soviet Union

1943 Minister of Electrical Undertakings

1952–1955 Attorney-General and Minister of Immigration

1960 Died 19 June in South Melbourne

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Michael Cannon. *That disreputable firm... the inside story of Slater and Gordon*. Melbourne University Press, 1998, Melbourne
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Slater and Gordon website: *Our History. Remember: a database of Victorian MPs since 1851*. www.parliament.vic.gov.au/re-member/bioregfull.cfm?mid=1444.

Parliament of Victoria website: www.parliament.vic.gov.au/speaker/former/slater.htm.

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