

# Flying capital

## Sydney Dattilo Rubbo memorial

Helen Billman-Jacobe, with input from Ann Westmore

Until fairly recently the bronze sculpture *Flying capital* sat atop a tall steel pole in the plaza near the Brownless and Baillieu libraries. It was created as a memorial to Sydney Dattilo Rubbo, Professor of Bacteriology at the University of Melbourne, by his partner at the time of his death, the sculptor Norma Redpath.

My interest in the sculpture was first aroused when a colleague informed me of a striking shadow the sculpture cast at a certain time of year (illustrated on page 20). He said the shadow resembled the silhouette of a man and a woman embracing—a most unexpected revelation because the figures are not at all obvious in the abstract sculpture.

Early one morning I saw the shadow for myself. It appeared on the eastern wall of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, the former School of Microbiology which Rubbo had led from 1945 until his sudden death in 1969. The wall is plain and uninterrupted by any door or window—a perfect brick canvas. The human shapes were clearly recognisable: a curvaceous female form on the left facing a slightly taller male figure. The shadow moved as the summer sun rose higher and, soon, it distorted and disappeared. Had the sculpture

been designed to make the shadow or was it merely coincidental? This thought, in December 2006, marks the day I first became interested in Rubbo and *Flying capital*.

Ever since, on my customary walk through the Rubbo Plaza, I have glanced up at *Flying capital* and checked for the shadow. In July 2008 I was horrified to see men disturbing the base of the sculpture with jackhammers. When I asked what was happening, I was told by a workman that the sculpture was ‘being removed to make way for improvements in the area’ related to the construction of the new neurosciences building. A short time later, as I waited for the lift in the microbiology building, I told a colleague what I had witnessed. She shook her head grimly, ‘This is happening all around us. We are losing our history.’ Soon after, I watched the workmen sever the bronze sculpture from its supporting column. Orange and white sparks rained down in the courtyard from which the sculpture soon disappeared.

Removal of the sculpture spurred me into action and I began to research Rubbo and *Flying capital*. Rubbo, I discovered, was the son of an Italian immigrant artist called Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, who arrived in Sydney in 1897 with just

a few words of English. Trained to teach art, Antonio soon established a successful art school and was appointed art teacher in a handful of Sydney private schools. He married an Australian-born nurse, Mildred Jobson, in 1904 and when their first child was born in 1911, they named him after the city of his birth.

Syd was a bright student, more interested in the sciences than in art, and when he left school he became an apprentice pharmacist, completed a BSc at the University of Sydney, and went to England to undertake the Diploma of Bacteriology at the prestigious London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. There he met and wooed a vivacious and talented graphic artist and dancer named Ellen Gray, a Sydneysider making waves of her own in London and on the continent. The household in which they both lived for a period was a political and cultural melting-pot, where Italian fascism and English pacifism were discussed and debated with verve and passion.

On finishing the diploma, Rubbo did a PhD on *Penicillium roqueforti*—the mould used to make blue-vein cheese—a topic that seems to have inspired in him a commercial sensibility that was to become his academic hallmark.



Shadow cast by Norma Redpath's *Flying capital, Sydney Dattilo Rubbo memorial* on the wall of the microbiology building, 1997.  
 Photograph by Michael Dyall-Smith.  
 Private collection, reproduced by kind permission of Dr Michael Dyall-Smith.

No sooner had he completed his thesis in 1937, and at the very time when he was discussing job prospects with Howard Florey at Oxford University, than he heard about a teaching position in the Bacteriology School at the University of Melbourne. With his marriage to Gray imminent, he chose the certainty of a job 'in preference to year to year fellowships available on this side of the equator'.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, Professor Harold Woodruff was the head of bacteriology at the University of Melbourne and it is apparent that he groomed Rubbo to take over from him. Like Woodruff, Rubbo campaigned for many years for a new building until finally, in 1965, his department was rehoused and renamed the School of Microbiology.

In the many years it took to gain the go-ahead and resources for the new building, the department had changed from a decrepit diagnostic laboratory with limited teaching facilities to become the leading microbiology school in Australia. The building was Rubbo's 'baby' and reflected his team approach to learning, teaching and research, and his genuine interest in developing the potential of students and colleagues alike.

At the same time as the new school was reaching completion, Rubbo's marriage to Ellen Gray was disintegrating. By 1967 he had told his four adult children that the marriage was over and that he was planning a new life with Norma Redpath, a successful sculptor who had studied painting and sculpture at Swinburne and RMIT and in Italy.

Some years earlier, Redpath's first solo exhibition of plaster models and bronze casts had won critical approval, one commentator noting:

Her main concern appears to be to build these forms architecturally so that they display exactly the right tension with each other. Overall flatness is interrupted by bulging and jutting elements; expanses curved to create a volume are opposed to voids between segments. Her images are bold and imaginative. And the smaller bronzes also demonstrate her extraordinary powers.<sup>2</sup>

Her seven-foot bronze *Dawn sentinel* was described as giving the exhibition 'dramatic, sledge-hammer impact'.

While Redpath was developing her technical skills, she was also

refining her characteristic style. After creating a relief sculpture for the new BP buildings in St Kilda Road, Melbourne, she wrote about the process:

It was during the execution of this piece that I finally cast off certain shackles of past learning, a school of thought that indicated sculptural form must be complete and self-contained ... One particular section of this work became important to me as a lead to further development, this I isolated, and this piece I was granted permission by my client to cast, which I have called Relief Fragment.<sup>3</sup>

In 1965 the fragment was loaned to Rubbo to display in the foyer of his new School of Microbiology.<sup>4</sup>

Skipping ahead in this story to a cool Saturday in April 1969, Rubbo went alone to his Mount Martha holiday house where he spent the day working in the garden. He did not return that evening as expected and early the next day an anxious Redpath found him lying in the garden, dead from a heart attack.

Friends, students and colleagues were stunned by his premature passing, and soon sought to

Norma Redpath, *View from direct south along Medical Road with the microbiology building on the right*, image no. 1 from *Proposed sculpture: Sydney Dattilo Rubbo memorial*, ¼" x 1" sketch model illustrating basic idea, [February 1970]. Private collection (copy also in University of Melbourne Archives). Reproduced by kind permission of Norma Redpath.



raise a memorial to him. A trust committee established to achieve this aim discussed with Redpath the possibility of commissioning an abstract work of art and she indicated that she would appreciate the opportunity to carry out the work herself and would accept no fee. Hundreds of friends, colleagues, students and companies donated money for the production and casting of the sculpture.

When Redpath planned a public work, her foremost concern was the characteristics of the site, followed by the aim and feasibility. 'Only when these parameters have been turned into a framework with all feasibilities established should a vision be released and final design work be initiated',

she wrote.<sup>5</sup> The use of a capital—a long column with a sculptural form on the top—had emerged in her work in the late 1960s and became a recurring format.

In early 1970 Redpath presented a model (illustrated above) of a sculptural column to the Rubbo memorial committee, telling them it was a sketch model to illustrate an idea she planned to develop with her team of highly trained assistants in Milan. In his film *Australian sculpture '69*, filmmaker Tim Burstall showed Redpath making a plaster scale model resembling *Flying capital*.

Archival material indicates that Redpath designed *Flying capital* and the Rubbo Plaza to be viewed as a whole, with the column situated at

the intersection of two lines: one lying along Medical Road and the other at right angles to the east end of the microbiology building. In letters to the university she wrote, 'I do feel that the position is of importance for I have designed not just a freestanding piece of sculpture, but have endeavoured to integrate the whole area spatially into a unique experience ...'<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she wrote:

**IMPORTANT:** As the sculpture must be erected with a specific axis I do request that the base plate be marked so that I have a precise directional reference to the mounting of the sculpture and that this axis be placed in precise right angle with the end wall of the Microbiology building. The axial direction of the base plate and the sculpture flange must be identical.<sup>7</sup>

While Redpath worked in Milan, the university was responsible for constructing the dais and erecting the supporting column. This turned out to be rather a problem, as steel for a column of the required 12-inch diameter was not available in Australia. The university architects planned to get a steel shaft manufactured from a 30-foot length



*Flying capital* at the foundry in Milan, 1973.  
 Photograph by Norma Redpath. Private collection,  
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of water bore casing and asked engineers to fabricate one column out of two blanks of steel tube obtained from England. The materials arrived and Arthur Kinsman from the university's buildings department went down to the docks to claim them. When he opened the boxes he found that the pole was crooked and out of round. The manufacturers doubted they could make another shaft within six months, and so vice-principal Ray Marginson proposed the purchase of a steel pole of slightly different diameter, which was available in Australia. Redpath, however, had cast the sculpture to accommodate a 12-inch diameter pole and it had already been despatched from Italy by ship in July 1973.<sup>8</sup>

Eventually a suitable steel pole was obtained locally and it was installed in the Rubbo Plaza in October 1973. It remained there for several months while an inscription ring was cast. Finally the capital was placed on the shaft in March 1974, Redpath having cleverly designed the sculpture for streamlined installation. It had a plate at the top that could be removed to reveal an anchor point for a crane to hoist the heavy bronze mass and lower it onto the shaft (illustrated above). Once the capital was locked in place, the

sculpture was draped with a tarpaulin until the official conferring ceremony.

By 1974, Professor James Pittard was head of the Department of Microbiology and on 22 March that year he presided over a modest ceremony to unveil the sculpture. Professor Pittard made a short speech on behalf of the donors, formally offering the sculpture to the university. Chancellor Leonard Weickhardt accepted, and the guests retired for refreshments. The following day the 800 donors who had contributed funds for the work were invited to inspect the sculpture informally. *The Herald* art critic Alan McCulloch commented briefly that:

... Norma Redpath's bronze *Flying Capital* is the outstanding work of the week. Organised by friends, family and colleagues as a memorial to the late Professor Sydney Rubbo, the two ton sculpture rose on its 6 metre steel pole at the eastern end of the Medical Research Centre without fuss or fanfare. It is a strangely original work, fully expressive of the Mediterranean culture from which Professor Rubbo sprang while expressing also in its massive, slotted sections the space-age of science and the machine.<sup>9</sup>

Redpath's own description of the sculpture was equally vague, being 'a modern capital recalling the classic forms by the use of form fragments which in turn break away from the initial discipline into new forms, hinting at new ideas and a new order'.<sup>10</sup>

While many of Redpath's works incorporate a theme of the sun, the dawn and light passing through and around sculptural forms, she did not refer to these elements in her description. Nor has she, in subsequent discussions, elaborated on the subject of *Flying capital's* evocative shadow. When shown a photograph of the shadow, the sculptor, now in her eighties, put the photograph in her pocket but remained silent. When Rubbo's younger son recently asked her if she had created the shadow intentionally, she smiled wryly and evaded the question.

The eleventh of September 2011 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Sydney Dattilo Rubbo. Art lovers and those interested in the history of the University of Melbourne will all welcome the reinstatement of his memorial in the Rubbo Plaza, scheduled for January 2012.

Norma Redpath, *Flying capital, Sydney Dattilo Rubbo memorial*, 1969–73, bronze mounted on steel column, height: 2.75 metres (capital); 6.65 metres (column). Reg. no. 1970.0248, gift of the colleagues, students and friends of Professor Sydney Dattilo Rubbo, 1974, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Photograph by Wolfgang Sievers, 1974, gelatin silver print, 24.8 x 19.3 cm. Accession no. H2001.40/79, State Library of Victoria.



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- 1 S.D. Rubbo, Letter to T.S. Gregory, 8 July 1937. UM312, University of Melbourne Registrar's correspondence, 1937/49, Bacteriology, Senior lecturer in. University of Melbourne Archives.
- 2 A. Warren, 'Leaping with life', *The Sun*, 14 November 1963.
- 3 Norma Redpath, 'Casting the relief fragment', *Western Australian Art Gallery Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 20, June 1966, pp. 163–7.
- 4 The university had another of Redpath's sculptures: *Areopagitica*, 1958–59, silky oak and tempera, approx. width: 4 metres. Reg. no. 1958.0012, commissioned 1958, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Still adorning the entrance foyer of the Baillieu Library, this painted relief carving was the winning design in the mural competition held for that building in 1958. Other competition entrants included Ellen Rubbo.
- 5 Norma Redpath, *Images and ideas, Theatre of the mind*, preliminary draft, 1985.
- 6 Norma Redpath, Letter to R. Marginson, 25 August 1970. Archive of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, University of Melbourne, Sydney Dattilo Rubbo Collection.
- 7 Norma Redpath, Letter to V.C. Sullivan, 17 September 1971. Central Registry correspondence, UM267, file 8-92-1, 1971, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 8 Ray Marginson also discusses this incident in 'Impecunious magpies, or how to adorn a university with little ready cash', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 7, December 2010, pp. 28–9.
- 9 Alan McCulloch, 'Picking up loose ends', *Herald*, 24 March 1974, p. 17.
- 10 'Professor Rubbo's memory honoured', *University Gazette*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1974, pp. 1, 9.