

Let us call it *Sir Sam*

The unexpected arrival of the bust of Sir Samuel Wilson

James Waghorne

Early in 1886 a crate addressed to the University of Melbourne arrived by ship at the city's Queen's Wharf. When the box was delivered to the university and opened, and the packing material cleared away, it revealed a man's head and shoulders carved in marble, but no name-plate or accompanying documentation to identify the sitter—the only inscription identified the sculptor, Marshall Wood. Puzzled university officials could find no record of having ordered such a statue, and they were not immediately sure whom it memorialised. While awaiting further information, they placed the bust in the bay window of the university's Council Chamber in the north wing of the Quadrangle.¹

Many theories were suggested on the identity of the subject of the bust. A member of the University Council, barrister and parliamentarian Dr George Mackay, wondered whether it resembled Sir Samuel Wilson (1832–1895), the prominent pastoralist and parliamentarian. Like Mackay, Wilson had come to Victoria from Ireland during the Gold Rush, amassing prodigious wealth from pastoral runs in western Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. From his seat at Ercildoune, near Ballarat, he raised prize-winning merinos. He also

served for more than 30 years as a conservative parliamentarian in Victoria and then Britain (after returning there in 1881). His 1875 donation of £30,000—the largest received by the university for almost the next 50 years—had funded the construction of the original Wilson Hall in grand Tudor Perpendicular style.

Mackay wrote to Sir Samuel in Britain, who explained that he had sat for the British sculptor Marshall Wood in Melbourne in 1881. He had done so under the impression that the university had contracted the work.²

Marshall Wood (c. 1836–1882) was a well-regarded sculptor who had come to Melbourne during the 1880 International Exhibition. He was able to sell a number of works representing royalty, contemporary literary figures and prominent individuals. Despite his success, he was sometimes criticised for his conventional, aestheticised work. *Melbourne Punch* labelled him an 'itinerant bagman sculptor' for peddling his collection of sculptures in Empire capitals.³ His statue of Queen Victoria that now stands in Queen's Hall in the Victorian Parliament House has similar counterparts in Sydney, Montreal, Ottawa and Calcutta. Wood died suddenly in 1882, soon after he left Australia.



In September 1886, the university was again surprised when it received a letter from Fanny Helen Wood, the sculptor's widow, confirming that the bust was indeed of Sir Samuel Wilson. Her letter was short: 'Having heard that the bust of Sir Samuel Wilson is now unveiled, I shall be pleased to receive a cheque for the benefit of the estate'.⁴

The University Council bristled at this request. It had neither 'unveiled' nor commissioned the bust, and resented the demand for money. An indignant Dr Alexander Morrison,

Opposite: F. Wolf, Sir Samuel Wilson, 1880, oil on canvas on board, 171.0 × 107.7 cm (sight). Gift of the sons of Sir Samuel Wilson 1900, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Below: Marshall Wood, Sir Samuel Wilson, c. 1880, marble, approx. 83 × 63 × 40 cm, inscribed *MARSHALL WOOD / FECIT*. 0000.0438, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

the no-nonsense principal of Scotch College, called it 'a try on' and, despite opposition from his counterpart from Wesley College, Martin Howy Irving, that it would be 'rather cruel', the Council resolved that 'the marble statue now in the Council chamber, which is supposed to be Samuel Wilson, Knight ... be removed, and that the owner, or person who sent the same, be requested to take it back'.⁵



The newspapers made a great deal of the affair, drawn to the whiff of scandal involving the proud university, a prominent sculptor and a knight. Part of the fun was that the university had failed to recognise the face of its largest benefactor. Another joke mocked Wood for carving a likeness that so idealised its subject that it was unrecognisable.⁶ There was also the suggestion of some kind of impropriety.

It was not clear how the bust had come to be made. There were some grounds for doubting Sir Samuel's version of events. The wool king styled himself as a gentleman, but felt his lack of pedigree. His philanthropy earned him a knighthood, and historians have sometimes derided him as a social climber.⁷ He was also the subject of gossip, including the allegation that, during his election



Conferring of honorary degree on the Duke of York (later King George V) in Wilson Hall, 12 May 1901, gelatin silver photograph, 20.0 × 15.0 cm, from album *Melbourne University 1901*. UMA/1/1005, University of Melbourne Archives. The bust of Sir Samuel Wilson is to the right of the stage (when viewed from the audience).



campaign for the seat of Portsmouth in Britain, he commissioned a historian to trace his family line back to Alfred the Great.⁸ His mannered ‘airs and graces’ alienated some locals, who called him ‘Sir Sham’ behind his back.⁹ At around this time, he had commissioned a painted portrait (pictured on page 12), and it is possible that he could have backed out of a similar agreement for a sculpture.

Since Wood had died, he could not be asked for clarification. Perhaps he had made the sculpture intending to play the university and Wilson off against one another. Perhaps Wood himself had been misled by someone associated with the university who had intimated that such a likeness would be well received. Either way, no contract had been entered into before the work was done.

It is not clear how Fanny Wood received the university’s repudiation—here the archival trail runs out. The affair is not mentioned again in the Council minutes, and the registrar’s files include no further correspondence. It is to be hoped that cooler heads prevailed and that a settlement was reached, either out of charity to the widow, or to spare the graces of Sir Samuel and the university—sentiments expressed by *Melbourne Punch*, albeit in larrikin tone:

‘Sir Sam,’ let us call
It, if such is the case,
For it seems a disgrace
To refuse it. I trust
That the Council will write
In a manner polite,
That they’ll keep it—well, just
As a keepsake, to show
There’s no affair, you know.¹⁰

In any event, when Sir Samuel died in 1895, the bust was still standing on its plinth in the Council Chamber.¹¹

By 1900, the bust had been moved into Wilson Hall to accompany three other busts that had since been donated to the university.¹² These were representations of Dr W.E. Hearn, one of the four founding professors and a former chancellor;¹³ Hugh C.E. Childers, the first vice-chancellor, who had steered the university’s establishing legislation through the parliament;¹⁴ and Lauchlan Mackinnon, the first chairman of the Building Committee that oversaw the early development of the campus.¹⁵ In this company, Sir Samuel’s bust came to be well regarded, and the circumstances of its arrival forgotten.



On 25 January 1952, fire destroyed Wilson Hall. A long list of items was lost in the blaze: university records,



the chancellor's throne, and a number of paintings, including John Longstaff's portraits of former chancellor John MacFarland and past professor of chemistry Sir David Orme Masson. The salvage party working beneath the burning rafters managed to haul out the vice-chancellor's ceremonial throne and 15 oak chairs, but found the marble busts too heavy;¹⁶ the busts of Childers and Hearn were destroyed. However, the bust of Sir Samuel survived, along with that of Mackinnon and the 'Leckie' stained-glass window in the Hall's south-west end.¹⁷

Newspapers singled out the survival of the Wilson bust for particular attention because of its connection with the Hall. It was considered more miraculous when it was realised that his portrait, which had also hung in Wilson Hall, had been removed the previous week for cleaning, together with five other paintings.¹⁸

For a university devastated by the loss of its ceremonial hall on the eve of its centenary year, the survival of Sir Samuel's bust became a symbol of the institution's resolve in the face of calamity. It was a reminder that the 'generosity and imagination' of great donors were in 1952—as in 1875—qualities essential to the university's development.¹⁹

Dr James Waghorne is a historian who leads the University History Program at the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne. His current projects include a new history of the Melbourne University Union.

The bust of Sir Samuel Wilson can be seen in the foyer of Wilson Hall when the building is open for examinations, graduation ceremonies and other events.

- 1 *Australasian*, 11 September 1886, p. 26.
- 2 *Australasian*, 11 September 1886, p. 29.
- 3 *Melbourne Punch*, 24 November 1881, p. 4.
- 4 Fanny H. Wood to University Council, 2 July 1886. UM312, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 5 University of Melbourne Council minutes, 6 September 1886. University of Melbourne Archives.
- 6 'The bust of Sir Samuel Wilson', *Melbourne Punch*, 16 September 1886, p. 134.
- 7 R.J.W. Selleck, *The Shop: The University of Melbourne, 1850–1939*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 137; Geoffrey Serle, *The rush to be rich: A history of the colony of Victoria, 1883–1889*, Melbourne University Press, 1971, p. 219n.
- 8 'A descendant of Alfred the Great', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 25 June 1888, p. 6.
- 9 Margaret Kiddle, *Men of yesterday: A social history of the Western District of Victoria, 1834–1890*, Melbourne University Press, 1961, p. 496.
- 10 'The mysterious bust', *Melbourne Punch*, 9 September 1886, p. 2.
- 11 'The late Sir Samuel Wilson and his gift to the colony', *Weekly Times*, 22 June 1895, p. 10.
- 12 'Annual report, 1899–1900', *University of Melbourne Calendar, 1901*, p. 433.
- 13 'Hearn Memorial Fund 1888–94', *Age*, 1 May 1888, p. 5; 'The late Dr Hearn', *Argus*, 4 November 1893, p. 10.

- 14 Donated by subscribers with a dossier of materials setting out H.C.E. Childers' claim to be the university's founder. (Geoffrey Blainey, *A centenary history of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press, 1957, pp. 205–9.)
- 15 Donated by his daughter, L.C. Mackinnon. ('Death of Mr Lauchlan Mackinnon', *Argus*, 23 March 1888, p. 7.)
- 16 'Some treasures saved', *Age*, 30 January 1952, p. 3.
- 17 Jason Benjamin and Emily Wubben, *Architectural ornament: The history and art of Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne*, Cultural Collections Department, University of Melbourne, 2012, p. 39.
- 18 'Wilson Hall fire: University leaders say loss is tragedy', *Age*, 26 January 1952, p. 3.
- 19 R.M. Crawford, *Wilson Hall: Centre and symbol of the university*, Melbourne University Press, 1952; C.J. Lowe to the editor, 'Wilson Hall fund opened', *Age*, 1 February 1952, p. 2. Despite this sentiment, the bust was not immediately installed in the reconstructed Wilson Hall, perhaps because it did not suit the new building's modernist aesthetic. Some years later, the university's vice-principal, Ray Marginson, organised for it to be conserved and placed in the foyer of Wilson Hall next to the bust of Mackinnon, both sculptures on new pedestals commissioned from local monumental masons Giannarelli Brothers. ('Impecunious magpies, or how to adorn a university with little ready cash: Ray Marginson, interviewed by Robyn Sloggett', *University of Melbourne Collections*, no. 7, December 2010, pp. 26–34 (32).)