

A royal portrait

Henry F. Atkinson

In late December 1962 when the School of Dental Science was all packed up to leave the building which it had occupied since 1907, at 193 Spring Street, Melbourne, for the 'New Dental School and Hospital' on Elizabeth Street, Dr Alan Grant, a senior lecturer, on his last visit saw in an overflowing rubbish bin, a framed photograph with unbroken glass. This immediately aroused his interest and so he took possession. Some years later when Alan's room was being cleared, the framed photograph reappeared and being considered of historical interest, it was added to the embryo dental museum collection.

The object in question is a dark-stained wooden picture frame holding a signed sepia-toned photograph of his Royal Highness, Albert, Duke of York, in naval dress. Below this is a faded type-written letter, now almost undecipherable; fortunately however a later copy is glued on the back. The letter was sent from Government House in Adelaide on 4 May 1927, and addressed to C.D. Hearman, President of the Dental Students' Society, Melbourne. It reads:

Dear Sir,

I am desired by His Royal Highness the Duke of York to thank you for your letter of April 30th.

He deeply regrets that he is unable to accept the position of Honorary Life Member of the Dental Students' Society. The reason is that it is now the established practice for Members of the Royal Family to accept such positions in Clubs and Organisations as a *whole* and not in individual branches; and as your society would appear to be a branch of the University His Royal Highness is afraid he cannot make an exception to this rule. He is, however, very pleased to send you a photograph of himself for the Students' Common Room, with his best wishes, and I forward it herewith. I am, at the same time, to assure you that he will always have very happy recollections of his visit to the University.

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) P.K. Hodgson
Private Secretary.

C.D. Hearman, Esq.,
The President,
Dental Students' Society,
Melbourne.

Cecil Hearman was at that time studying dental science; he later

became a member of the staff of the Dental Hospital and the School, a leader of the profession, author of several papers and of a text on his life's interest—diet and the prevention of dental disease.¹

The events which led to the gift of the portrait are a keystone of dental student history and mythology. They were first known to me many years ago when proclaimed by Professor Frank C. Wilkinson at a social occasion in the mid-1930s after he had been appointed to a position at the University of Manchester, similar to that which he had held for ten years as Dean of the Faculty of Dental Science at the University of Melbourne. The Professor stated with pride and dramatic effect that his dental students had planned and carried out, under the noses of the authorities, the kidnapping of the Duke of York while he was on a formal visit to the University of Melbourne. Having heard since then many different versions of this occasion, ranging from attempts by the dental authorities to eliminate it from the records as an insignificant and greatly exaggerated student rag, harmful to the profession, to highly colourful accounts that improved with each telling, my interest was again stimulated by the finding of the photograph.

The photograph with attached letter was the first evidence I had seen that something momentous had occurred during the Duke's visit. A search of issues of the *Mouth Mirror*, the 'Official Magazine of the Melbourne Dental Students' Society', revealed in the 1948 edition an unsigned article entitled 'The King is a dental student'.² This had been written some 20 years after the event, by one who had apparently taken part, and was therefore thought to be a fairly accurate account. The article indicates that elaborate arrangements had been made by the dental students to kidnap the Duke after he had received an honorary degree at a formal ceremony in Wilson Hall. Their efforts included the hiring of a landau and appropriate costumes for the attendants. The article states that as the Duke was leaving the hall he was surrounded by students and then whisked away in the horse-drawn carriage and taken to 'the dungeon', the dental students' common room in the basement of 193 Spring Street in the city, the building occupied by the Australian College of Dentistry and the Dental Hospital. There he was questioned and inducted into the Dental Students' Society. After what must have been a most gruelling and nerve-racking experience, he was returned safely to an anxious crowd



waiting outside Wilson Hall.

Further searches revealed an editorial in the *Melbourne University Magazine* of June 1927 which describes the event in some detail. It states that the dental students did most of the planning, produced the carriage and conducted the initiation ceremony but—and here there is an essential difference between the two accounts—the tour was of the University grounds only, 'round the lake', not to the city, and the ceremony was held in 'the Clubhouse' on the campus, not 'the dungeon' in Spring Street. The editorial gives credit to the other student groups and the SRC which helped 'to make the day a success'.³

The story is a wonderful example of leadership and cooperation within the student body; it provides a glimpse into the innocence and amazing freedoms of the times; and vividly contrasts the community's devotion to the Royal Family with the thoughts of the disaster that would occur if such an event were contemplated today, in our necessarily protective society.

Professor Emeritus Henry F. Atkinson MBE joined the University of Melbourne in 1953 as Chair of Dental Prosthetics, and retired as Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry in 1978. He has worked on the dental collection for over 50 years and was made Honorary Curator in the early 1990s. In 2006 the museum was named the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum in appreciation of his many years of work.

Notes

- 1 Cecil Hearman, *Diet: Its relation to dental health*, Melbourne: A.H. Massina, 1940. Reg. no. 1921.1, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne.
- 2 'The King is a dental student', *Mouth Mirror*, 1948, pp. 37–38. Reg. no. 2567, Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, University of Melbourne.
- 3 Editorial, 'The visit of the Duke of York', *Melbourne University Magazine*, vol. 21, no. 3, June 1927.