

# Retrieving Ted Larkin (1880-1915)

**OUTSTANDING FOOTBALLER,  
ACCLAIMED ORGANISER,  
ORIGINAL ANZAC**



**Ross McMullin**



17th Annual Tom Brock Lecture



# Retrieving Ted Larkin (1880-1915)

OUTSTANDING FOOTBALLER,  
ACCLAIMED ORGANISER,  
ORIGINAL ANZAC

Ross McMullin

17th Annual  
Tom Brock Lecture

99 On York  
Sydney NSW

16 September 2015



Australian Society for Sports History

[www.sporthistory.org](http://www.sporthistory.org)

# Retrieving Ted Larkin (1880-1915): Outstanding Footballer, Acclaimed Organiser, Original Anzac

17th Annual Tom Brock Lecture  
99 On York, Sydney, 16 September 2015

Published in 2016 by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of the Australian Society for Sports History.

© 2016 Tom Brock Bequest Committee and the Australian Society for Sports History. This monograph is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the *Copyright Act*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-9804815-8-7

Front cover digital image: Tracey Baglin. Background image: The landing at ANZAC, Gallipoli, 25th April 1915, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Ted Larkin image: NSW State Records.

All text images provided by Ross McMullin from the sources credited.

Thanks are due to the respective owners of copyright for permission to publish these images.

Layout and design: Level Playing Field graphic design

<onthelevel@exemail.com.au>

Printing: On Demand [www.on-demand.com.au/](http://www.on-demand.com.au/)

## Tom Brock Bequest

The Tom Brock Bequest, given to the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) in 1997, consists of the Tom Brock Collection supported by an ongoing bequest. The Collection, housed at the State Library of New South Wales, includes manuscript material, newspaper clippings, books, photographs and videos on rugby league in particular and Australian sport in general. It represents the finest collection of rugby league material in Australia. ASSH has appointed a Committee to oversee the Bequest and to organise appropriate activities to support the Collection from its ongoing funds.

### Objectives

1. To maintain the Tom Brock Collection.
2. To organise an annual scholarly lecture on the history of Australian rugby league.
3. To award an annual Tom Brock Scholarship to the value of \$5000.
4. To undertake any other activities which may advance the serious study of rugby league.
5. To publicise the above activities.

### Activities

1. The Tom Brock Lecture.
2. The Tom Brock Scholarship.
3. Updating the Collection with new material published on rugby league.
4. Reporting to ASSH on an annual basis.

Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located at [www.tombrock.com.au/](http://www.tombrock.com.au/)

# Retrieving Ted Larkin (1880-1915)

OUTSTANDING FOOTBALLER, ACCLAIMED  
ORGANISER, ORIGINAL ANZAC

Dr Ross McMullin is an historian and biographer who has researched and written widely in Australian history, particularly in politics, sport and World War I. All three of these specialties are prominent in his 2015 Tom Brock Lecture. His book *Pompey Elliott* won awards for biography and literature. Another biography, *Will Dyson: Australia's Radical Genius*, was commended by the judges of the National Biography Award. He also wrote the commissioned ALP centenary history *The Light on the Hill*, and another political history *So Monstrous a Travesty: Chris Watson and the World's First National Labour Government*. His latest book, *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation*, is a multi-biography of ten exceptional Australians who died in World War I. Among them is Ted Larkin, who played a significant role in the early years of rugby league. *Farewell, Dear People* was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History and the National Cultural Award.

---

17th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2015,  
© 2015 Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of the  
Australian Society for Sports History, <http://www.sportshistory.org>

*Edward Rennix Larkin  
was born on 3 January  
1880 near Newcastle,  
where his father was a  
quarryman and miner.  
The family later moved to  
Sydney, where they resided  
in inner suburbs such as  
Camperdown and Newtown.*  
CREDIT: NSW State Records.



My biography of Ted Larkin was part of my research into Australia's lost generation of World War I, which resulted in the multi-biography *Farewell, Dear People* and, if all goes well, will eventually result in the publication of another multi-biography of outstanding Australians who did not survive the war and also exemplify our lost generation from that conflict.

The idea of the project was to retrieve the forgotten stories of Australians of remarkable pre-war potential and partial achievement who didn't survive the war and exemplify our lost generation of that conflict in that they were a national-level loss because they were so special.

Ted Larkin certainly fits into this model.

And there was another aim I had in mind — diversity of background and specialty. I didn't want it to be dominated by reaffirmation of privilege. I didn't want the biographies to be a succession of budding barristers from affluent families. There are a couple of them in the ten, but they're not all like that. Ted exemplifies diversity in both ways — his specialties were different from the others, and his family background was working-class.

Edward Rennix Larkin was born on 3 January 1880 near Newcastle, where his father was a quarryman and miner. Both his parents were born in New South Wales, and Ted was their third child. The family later moved to Sydney, where Ted's father worked on the roads and became a foreman, and they came to reside in inner suburbs such as Camperdown and Newtown.

## Larkin's unspectacular virtues

Most of Ted's education occurred not far away at St Benedict's in Chippendale, where the attributes that were to carry him to distinction became evident. Ted Larkin became an achiever not through spectacular talent, but through the unspectacular virtues of application and organisation. Persistent and painstaking, diligent and determined, he personified the maxim that success derives from perspiration more than inspiration. He was captain of St Benedict's in 1894.

That same year he was awarded a scholarship that enabled him to continue his education as a boarder at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill. At St Joseph's he studied hard and did well again at his exams, especially in English and literary subjects. Ted was seen as a 'brilliant student'.

Ironically, in view of his later achievements and renown, he wasn't interested in sport at St Joseph's — at least at first. Gradually, though, with friends of his playing rugby at school, he felt drawn to join them. Initially he was no good. Natural aptitude seemed clearly lacking. Ted was characteristically undeterred by this, and persevered. He came to love the game, redoubled his endeavours, and this assiduous practice produced conspicuous progress. He was hooked. 'We doubt if St. Joseph's ever had a keener footballer', the school magazine remarked.

He also liked cricket, boxing and swimming, and was good at them, but rugby was his passion. After leaving school he became playing coach of the local Endeavour Club. Thanks in large measure to Larkin's enthusiasm and expertise, Endeavour enjoyed an unbeaten season and 'rapidly rose to be one of the best fifteens



outside senior ranks'. He was soon playing first-grade for Newtown in the main suburban competition.

Larkin's versatility and leadership reflected his keen understanding of the game. He won representative honours as a half-back for Endeavour before reverting to five-eighth and then transferring to Newtown's front row. Ted captained Newtown in 1903, which became a special year for him.

The visiting New Zealand team started their 1903 tour of Australia with a 12–nil victory over New South Wales on 18 July. Reviewing this encounter in the respected sports weekly the *Referee*, the influential sports journalist Jack Davis made a comment that raised eyebrows: he declared that he would rather watch Newtown than New South Wales.

## The principal architect

Davis elaborated that Newtown's attractive style did not derive from the mastery of a few stars. It was because Newtown's players combined 'splendidly', especially the forwards. Davis contended that Newtown's forwards were 'far quicker' and 'cleverer' than their counterparts in the state side. He even asserted that New Zealand had less cohesion and variety in attack than Newtown (and some experts have claimed that no better team from New Zealand has ever visited Australia). It was odd, Davis concluded, that only one forward from Newtown (Harold Judd) could find a place in the New South Wales side. Ted Larkin, though inexperienced as a forward, was, as Newtown's captain, the principal architect of its attractive and effective cohesion.

On the day after Davis's article was published, a messenger reached Ted Larkin with an unexpected summons. He was urgently wanted at state training. A group of forwards was practising under the light of a gas lamp at Erskineville Oval, and Larkin was required to join them. What made this urgent message even more arresting was that Larkin had things other than football on his mind — he was getting married the following day. Larkin made it to training and found himself included in the New South Wales team as one of six changes for the return match against the New Zealanders.

It was a momentous 48 hours for Ted Larkin. Promoted out of the blue into the state side on the Thursday, married on the Friday to May Yates of Annandale, and on the Saturday he headed off in pouring rain to the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) to debut for New South Wales against the all-conquering New Zealanders. Thanks to the weather, the match was inevitably a slipping, slogging (but not unskilful) affair that was dominated by the forwards. Larkin





*The Australian rugby team 1903. Larkin is on the far left in the middle row, while Alec Burdon, who played alongside Larkin for New South Wales and Australia, is on the left end of the back row. CREDIT: State Library of Victoria.*

had a fine game, and the home side's forwards functioned more effectively. But the visitors, though hard-pressed on this occasion, hung on to win 3–nil.

It was not the only time Ted Larkin displayed an admirable ability to adjust to a higher level. Throughout his life, in various spheres, neither a change nor a challenge deterred him. This was further demonstrated when his rapid rise culminated a few weeks later in selection for Australia's national team. This especially thrilled those who remembered his initial scratchy attempts to play the game at St Joseph's.

This was New Zealand's first ever Test match, and Larkin, now 23, became one of Australia's earliest Wallabies. The SCG was again the venue, and 30,000 attended. They saw Larkin play a typically wholehearted game, but the New Zealanders were too good.

Larkin was not regarded as an unsavoury player, but he was strong, vigorous and a tenacious tackler. His boxing ability ensured that he could certainly look after himself. Ted's brother Martin was well-known in Sydney boxing circles as a capable welterweight.

Larkin had been working for some years as a writer for the *Year Book of Australia*. But after a change at the helm of the publication in 1903, he found himself on the outer. As a responsible new husband, he felt impecuniosity had arrived at the worst possible time. Six weeks after playing rugby for Australia he joined the New South Wales police force, and he and May moved to North Sydney.

Ted became one of the city's best-known foot-constables. For a while he played for North Sydney, and one day he happened to pass the North Sydney ground at a time when the players were training without him because he was on duty. His companion, a policeman new to the district, asked which team was training. When Larkin told him, this colleague responded brightly that he had seen them play the previous Saturday and they had a really old player. Larkin smiled, and said he was that player. He was 24 years old.

Larkin's hair silvered unusually early. It proceeded from brown to grey and then white with an alacrity that startled his family and friends. But Larkin remained outwardly unperturbed, and made light of the amusing misunderstandings that arose when his age was often overestimated. Making fun of setbacks was characteristic for this genial soul, who generally 'wore a cheerful face'.

Police hours proved incompatible with first-grade rugby, and Larkin gradually drifted out of the game. At the police force his industry and integrity impressed his superiors, and they gave him senior roles that utilised his first-rate clerical skills. But there was a problem, and it was significant — his police bosses disapproved of his politics.

## Police and politics

Larkin was an active Labor supporter. Soon after leaving school he had joined a literary and debating club that met each week, and he developed into a fluent, confident speaker. His emerging debating flair consolidated his interest in politics. For some time Ted had nurtured the notion that he might one day become a member of parliament. Initially this was a dream, almost a fantasy, but with his growing assurance as a speaker he began to sense that it might come within reach.

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was emerging with a rapidity that far exceeded the limited progress of equivalent parties elsewhere. Labor had been a significant force in the New South Wales parliament ever since its spectacular surge to prominence in 1891. The ALP had also advanced swiftly in federal politics. Chris Watson became prime minister of the first national labour government in the world in April 1904.

That Ted Larkin was a staunch Labor supporter was hardly surprising. Labor and Larkin had similar backgrounds; both had been shaped by Irish–Catholic working-class perceptions. Labor and Larkin had similar aspirations; both were striving to rise beyond the limitations of their backgrounds. Labor wanted its candidates to

attain more electoral support than the Irish–Catholic working class provided; Larkin wanted his family to attain more financial comfort than the Irish–Catholic working class experienced.

He was keen to consolidate his credentials as a Labor activist in North Sydney. But as far as his police chiefs were concerned, politics and the police did not mix. They especially objected to Labor politics. The fact that Larkin was reliable and respected as a policeman made no difference. He felt aggrieved about his superiors' attempts to thwart his after-hours activities, which were none of their business. Larkin felt stifled, and began to think about alternative employment options.

Alec Burdon, who had played alongside Larkin for New South Wales and Australia in 1903, injured his shoulder in a club match in May 1907. After weeks out of action he resumed playing, only to re-dislocate the shoulder on 22 July. Burdon was unable to do his normal toil on the wharves. He could not even earn, as he sometimes did, alternative income as a barber. This went on for months. The sight of this popular forward with his wing in a sling aggravated grievances about the administration of Australian rugby that had been accumulating for years.

What made things worse was that the same thing had happened three years earlier. Burdon was playing for Australia in a Test against England in 1904 when he injured his shoulder, couldn't work for months, and ended up in a difficult financial situation. Yet there was no compensation or assistance with medical expenses for Burdon, or for other players in equivalent circumstances. Rugby was a strictly amateur sport, and its administrators enforced this rigidly.

## Oysters and whisky

This was not because there was a dearth of funds. The bigger matches were generating considerable income, but the administrators and hangers-on saw more of it than the players did. In 1903 Larkin, Burdon and full-back John Maund played state and Test matches against New Zealand that substantially boosted rugby's coffers. Soon afterwards they joined their New South Wales team-mates at Central Station for the state side's trip to Queensland. 'There seemed to be as many officials as players', Maund noticed. 'The officials ate oysters and drank whisky on the train, but the players didn't get any.'

The players' grievances had escalated since 1903. The administration of rugby continued to be autocratic and atrocious. Blinkered financial priorities led to decrees reeking of self-interest, insensitivity, and inconsistency. Selection of interstate

*Larkin resigned from the police force in 1909 to take up a position as secretary to the burgeoning Rugby League competition, which prospered while he was running it.*

CREDIT: State Library of New South Wales.



and international teams was repeatedly criticised. Decisions about ground allocation and acquisition were farcical.

This state of affairs could not last. Players and their sympathisers — who included the legendary cricketer Victor Trumper — insisted that players should be paid. This might be fair, others conceded, but was it feasible? Animated discussions swirled around Sydney, especially at Trumper's sports shop. These debates canvassed the merits of a significant overseas precedent: professional clubs had broken away from the English Rugby Union and established their own competition, paying players to compensate for the loss of their Saturday wages. Trumper's group decided to follow suit. They formed the New South Wales Rugby League, with politician Harry Hoyle as president, Trumper as treasurer, and commercial traveller Jim Giltinan as secretary.

## The breakaway League

The breakaway Sydney League had objectives that Kerry Packer's cricket rebellion was to espouse seven decades later. Neither venture sought to start a new sport; both sought to wrest control from what the activists for change regarded as an obnoxious governing body. The early vicissitudes of Rugby League demonstrated its potential

to attract a significant following. The new rules it introduced — borrowed from the English professionals — were favourably received.

But financial success eluded the initial administrators. A disastrous tour of England bankrupted Giltinan. Hoyle and even Trumper (whose benevolent nature did not equip him to be a sharp businessman) lost support as well. Different office-bearers were installed.

Improving the quality of rugby league's administration was a priority for the new regime. They advertised for a paid secretary. Ted Larkin, the dissatisfied policeman, applied, and was chosen.

The position was tailor-made for him. He brought to it the informed perspective of a former forward with the prestige that came with having represented Australia. Larkin had always displayed painstaking diligence, but it was now complemented by a burgeoning visionary streak and growing confidence as a speaker and writer. With his Labor links, he was well connected in political as well as sporting circles.

Moreover, Larkin loved League. He regarded the traditional rugby union he had played as 'antediluvian' compared to this new version of the game. Furthermore, as a matter of principle he 'believed in honest professionalism as against quasi amateur football'. Ted Larkin was one of those fortunate souls who manage to turn an abiding hobby into a fulfilling job. The task of consolidating rugby league's fragile foundations with energetic and enterprising administration could hardly have been in better hands. It was no coincidence that league prospered while Larkin was running it.

Larkin resigned from the police force on 30 June 1909 to take up his new position. Jack Davis of the *Referee* considered this 'a fortunate day' for New South Wales rugby league. It had been 'torn with internal dissensions', and Larkin's task was 'extremely delicate'. But Davis acclaimed his success in the role: 'it speaks whole volumes for his discernment, tact and powers as an organiser' that league's 'regeneration from disorder started forthwith, and proceeded smoothly until, as an organising and sporting body, it won the good opinion of the public'.

A former Newtown team-mate also emphasised the magnitude of Larkin's achievement:

The new body immediately went ahead by leaps and bounds ... As an organiser he excelled. When the League required a speaker to defend it during its turbulent days, the secretary was an ideal man for the

task. With fluency and humour he quickly won over a gathering ... His happy manner was a fine asset to the League.

Larkin's achievement was widely acknowledged. The *Australian Worker* praised his 'abounding popularity and organizing ability', which 'made the League game the most prominent football code in the State'. Larkin's crucial role in rugby league's success became so recognised that he received approaches from other sporting bodies.

## More popular than Union

Soon after Larkin became Rugby League secretary, he was involved in the recruitment of notable union players, and some of these acquisitions were spectacular coups. Attendances in Sydney in 1910 confirmed that league had become much more popular than union. When a thrilling league clash between Australasia and a visiting English side on 9 July 1910 attracted a crowd exceeding 42,000, Larkin 'beamed with joy and gratification', the *Sydney Sportsman* reported.

His focus extended beyond the metropolis. He traversed the state, spreading the gospel to players, clubs, and schools; persuading Marist Brothers schools to make rugby league their official code was a notable success. Larkin's annual reports reflected 'his thoroughness, attention to detail and his progressive approach'. His salary, initially £180, was increased to £250 in 1910. Rugby league became the leading winter sport in Sydney and beyond, and no one was more instrumental than Ted Larkin.

Rugby league consolidated its connection to the Labor Party while Larkin was its secretary. The affiliation was natural. Advocates of amateurism tended to be affluent and politically conservative. Conversely, players who felt the financial pinch when injured — and those who empathised with them — tended to be working-class. Harry Hoyle, who was about to become a state Labor MP (and, from 1913, a minister) had been the League's initial president. Another Labor MP, Fred Flowers, influenced the code's development as South Sydney's president and the League's patron. Former prime minister Chris Watson also involved himself at Souths, and future prime minister Billy Hughes became club patron at Glebe.

## Labor in power

It was an exciting time to be a Labor activist. Labor had broken through for stirring election victories in 1910 in both the New South Wales state parliament and the federal sphere. A Labor government was in office with a lower house majority for the first time in both these



*Ted was 33 when he decided to nominate for Labor preselection, and he and May had two young boys. They were now living in Hipwood Street, Milson's Point, with a park across the road. CREDIT: NSW State Records.*

parliaments (and elsewhere as well). Larkin, like other true believers of that era, was delighted by the rapid progress Labor had made as a novel political entity with different mechanisms and procedures.

This sentiment was reinforced by Labor's tumultuous first experience of government in Larkin's home state. It had a meagre majority in the lower house and was well short of a majority in the upper house, which combined to create a kaleidoscope of crises and controversies. For sustained political drama it approached even the legendary turbulence of the later and better-known Scullin and Whitlam governments.

Labor's key figure was William Holman, who became state leader — and Premier — in 1913. He was a brilliant virtuoso whose mercurial talents enabled the government to survive. His devastating debating during this period has been described as a 'parliamentary tour de force unmatched in Australia' for more than 60 years. The author of this assessment was Graham Freudenberg,



who was evidently implying that there was nothing like it until Gough Whitlam's extraordinary performance during the 1975 constitutional crisis. Those of us familiar with that can appreciate how inspiring Holman was to a Labor devotee such as Ted Larkin.

A sweeping electoral redistribution complicated predictions about the 1913 New South Wales election. No fewer than 16 new seats were created in the lower house. One of them, Willoughby, was an unlikely prospect for Labor; in the previous election Labor's vote in the area had been a long way behind. In fact, apart from a brief, solitary (and usually forgotten) exception, Labor had never held any Sydney seat north of the harbour. Still, Ted Larkin wondered if he could create an upset in Willoughby. He decided to nominate for Labor preselection, and the party endorsed him as its candidate. Ted was now 33, and he and May had two young boys. They were now living in Hipwood Street, Milsons Point, with a park across the road.

Senior Labor strategists were sceptical about his prospects of capturing Willoughby. Even ardent Larkin admirers thought he had no hope. Nevertheless, Larkin's dedicated campaign was rewarded with a stunning victory. The *Worker* described it as 'the biggest surprise of the elections'. The *Freeman's Journal* concluded that no electoral contest north of the harbour had generated such 'interest and excitement' for half a century. The same paper felt that Larkin's reputation for integrity — his 'character ... uprightness and fair dealing' — was a big factor in his victory. Other papers attributed his success to his personal popularity and 'incisive' oratory. The *Daily Telegraph* predicted that he had a big future in politics.

Labor devotees celebrated euphorically in Willoughby, and a torchlight procession took over Lane Cove Road. In thanking his rapturous supporters, Larkin declared that it had long been an ambition of his to be elected to parliament, and it was a special thrill to do so in a seat that even party leaders had doubted could be won. His elder son, then five years old, retained a vivid lifelong memory of being carried through a jubilant crowd on his father's shoulders.

Having become a member of parliament, Larkin duly submitted his resignation as Rugby League secretary. Leading identities in the game regarded his departure with dismay. His crucial role in league's success was widely recognised. Besides, a British team would soon be visiting Australia. Larkin was asked to delay his resignation, and he agreed.

Fame and public life brought new obligations. Larkin's former state rugby team-mate, Snowy Baker, now a budding boxing impresario, embarked on an international trip shortly after the state

election. Sydney's sporting and political glitterati farewelled him at a swish black-tie function at the Australia Hotel. Ted Larkin was seated at the top table. With him were such luminaries as notorious entrepreneur H. D. McIntosh; Dick Meagher, the controversial ex-lawyer who had become an ALP powerbroker and Speaker in state parliament; boxer Dave Smith; record-breaking swimmer Cecil Healy; another notable swimmer (and Snowy's brother) Harold Baker; and journalists Jack Davis and Will Lawless. Ted Larkin's 'rise in the public eye' had been 'meteoric', Davis marvelled.

Parliament resumed in March 1914. Larkin was active and effective straightaway, reinforcing perceptions that he had a big future in politics. He was certainly more impressive, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter felt, than the other ALP newcomers, who included a little-known 37-year-old estate agent named Jack Lang.

## The Great War

Something else began in 1914 as well as Larkin's parliamentary career — the Great War. Larkin enlisted immediately. Friends, including Labor colleagues, sought to persuade him that in view of his public and family responsibilities he should not feel obliged to volunteer with the first enlisters. However, Larkin insisted that it was precisely because of his prominence in sport and public life that his early enlistment was appropriate, in order to encourage other sportsmen and athletes who might not come forward without an example being shown by their leaders.

Larkin masked his resolute sense of duty with what Holman described as a cloak of 'light-hearted intrepidity'. Holman again:

Nothing daunted him. He thought nothing of the dangers of his course. He refused to consider the possibilities of danger happening to himself. He laid these considerations behind him, and went forth to the battle in a spirit of easy determination to face whatever fate had in store, with the same ready and smiling courage with which he had previously faced all the incidents of his life, and in a manner eminently calculated [to encourage others] to follow in his footsteps.

Larkin enlisted as a private, but within a week he was a sergeant. He was offered further promotion, but felt he lacked the necessary qualifications to become an officer. He applied himself to military training 'with characteristic keenness and thoroughness'. His men



*Ted Larkin with his three brothers at Kensington Camp. Ted is on the left with Martin Larkin third from left. Ted and Martin were in the same company in the 1st AIF Battalion.* CREDIT: NSW State Records.

admired him. As a sergeant Larkin was capable, conscientious and kind-hearted. He was prepared to impose discipline when necessary, but punishing people to confirm his authority was not in his repertoire. Charles Bean, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) official correspondent and later historian, noted in his diary that Larkin was ‘a fine chap, with a fine influence amongst the men’.

And his enlistment did encourage younger sportsmen to join up, as he had hoped it would. Even an older sportsman followed him into the AIF — his brother Martin enlisted on 7 September, and they were placed in the same company (probably the same platoon).

The selfless nobility underpinning Ted Larkin’s decision to enlist moved many admirers. Some burst into verse. An example published in the Sydney *Sun* had another four verses like this one:

Sergeant Larkin, M.L.A., isn’t flinching from the fray;  
He’s not a fool; he knows the price that any man may pay  
Who goes out a-volunteering when the day of trouble’s  
nearing;

But he does it without fearing,  
And the British blood that's in him leaps to hear the  
bugles bray —  
Sergeant Larkin, M.L.A.

Aboard his troopship Larkin was prominently involved in the publication of a regular newssheet. After arriving in Egypt, Larkin was annoyed by various military injustices he encountered, and wrote to a friend about them: 'We in the labor movement have been struggling for equal opportunity and recognition of merit in every sphere of existence and we cannot hope for either in the military world under existing conditions', he declared. In Egypt Larkin was hospitalised with severe illness, lost five stone, and was urged to return to Australia. But he refused.

Larkin, like everyone, had endured more than enough of the training routine. 'Tramp, tramp, tramp through the sand day after day' was 'dreary' toil, he noted. 'We are anxious to get busy somewhere'. When diversions included an occasional game of football, Larkin again advocated the merits of rugby league.

His unit was at last directed to depart early in April. 'The Pyramids are left behind, thank Goodness', Larkin wrote, but he was under no illusions about the 'serious work' ahead. The AIF would probably be 'up against it', Ted predicted in a letter to May. Before going into action, he took off his wedding ring and put it in a safe place.

## Gallipoli

On 25 April 1915 Larkin went ashore with his battalion as part of the third wave of the landing force at Gallipoli. He led his men up and over the first hill to the plateau on the second ridge that was later known as Lone Pine, where fierce, fluid fighting occurred on that first day. It was here that Ted Larkin, striving to maintain the forward momentum, was fatally wounded. His brother Martin was also killed on that first day. As a Labor activist in a different battalion put it, 'Poor old Ted Larkin went down at the start and fell facing the enemy, right in the "forwards"'.

Thousands of Australians died at the landing, but Ted Larkin's death became more controversial than any other. There had been concern in AIF ranks about the prospect of Turkish mistreatment of Australian casualties; some Australians became convinced that the Turks would kill the wounded and mutilate the dead. Late in the afternoon of 25 April, in the ebb and flow of combat, some 1st Battalion men returning from a forward position came across

Larkin's body. They found it 'savagely slashed'. This was all the confirmation they needed. A rumour swept through the AIF that Sergeant Larkin's body had been mutilated.

After the Turks' unsuccessful attempt to drive the Anzacs into the sea on 19 May, an armistice was arranged to bury the decomposing dead of both sides. Larkin's body was located during the armistice, and various officers examined it. Some maintained that it looked as if it had been mutilated, but others concluded that he had in fact been hit by a burst of machine-gun fire, and this was the assessment of Charles Bean when he referred to Larkin's death in his magisterial *Official History*.

## News of his death

On 16 June, almost two months after the landing, May Larkin attended a Red Cross meeting during the afternoon. Having returned home, she was about to go out to Crows Nest for another Red Cross function when the jolting news arrived. The Larkins received the news of the deaths of Ted and Martin concurrently, compounding the shock.

Tributes poured in. It was the nature of Ted Larkin's sacrifice that mourners found especially moving. This was well known, though not at all trumpeted by the man himself. Some admirers were awed by it.

Sacrifice can be an overused word in this kind of context. But here was a middle-aged father of humble origins, who was particularly devoted to his family and not particularly devoted to the military. He had attained prominence and success through determination and toil. Bigger and better things were not far away. All this Larkin relinquished, reluctantly, with no illusions — he was well aware he was taking a big risk — because he conceived it as his duty, by virtue of his prominence (initially in sporting circles, more recently as an MP) to set an example.

He could have returned home with his integrity intact, as his superiors recommended, when illness reduced him by five stone. But he refused. At a time when Australians were struggling to adjust to the grim new phenomenon of lengthy casualty lists, there was something about this particular casualty that stirred deep emotion among those familiar with the circumstances.

Holman adjourned parliament after hearing of Larkin's death. A New South Wales Rugby League meeting was also adjourned. The League chairman, Charlie Ford, lamented that it was 'hard for a young country like Australia to lose such men'. All players and

officials wore black armbands in that week's matches. Sergeant Larkin had 'sacrificed everything for the sake of his country', declared the president of the New South Wales Labor Council. 'Everyone who came in contact with him had the highest praise and respect for him'.

A memorial service with a requiem mass for Larkin was held at St Mary's Cathedral on 27 June. Holman, the state Governor, and an array of other VIPs were present. Father P. J. Dowling delivered a fervent, stirring eulogy. The way he extolled the example set by the 'strong, noble, cheerful, dominating personality of the soldier-legislator' left many mourners in tears:

His life-long conviction that members of Parliament should be not the sycophantic followers, but the framers and leaders of public opinion, pointed out to him the hard and bitter road of self-denial. He knew well what he would have to sacrifice — the companionship of a devoted wife and children, the comforts of a happy home, the pleasure of many friendships, and a political career which already gave promise of a glorious future ... All this he sacrificed at the call of duty. His position as a member of the Legislative Assembly ... might well have entitled him to a commission, but he preferred to join the rank and file of his country's defenders in order to stimulate their patriotic devotion and encourage their enthusiasm.

Rugby league, the organisation that Ted Larkin had done so much to popularise, resolved to aid his family. The League announced that half the takings at its 1915 grand final on 11 September would be given to his sons. The League's donation to the Larkins exceeded £171.

The emotion sparked by Larkin's death prompted further assistance to his dependants from a variety of sources. An appeal launched by 'friends and admirers' of Larkin in October yielded £112 immediately. Government pension arrangements were also set in train for both May and the boys.

However, May did not want to become totally dependent on welfare. Capable and resourceful, she retrained as a factory inspector, and Premier Holman kept a supportive eye on her progress. She was notified months after Ted's death that he had been honoured with a special commendation for his 'conspicuous gallantry' at the Gallipoli landing. Ted's belongings eventually



*Ted Larkin on the left alongside George Braund, the MP for Armidale, who commanded the 2nd AIF Battalion and died during the first days at Gallipoli.*  
CREDIT: Australian War Memorial.

returned home to May in a series of packages. One parcel did not arrive until 13 March 1916. It contained just one item — his wedding ring.

May was 31 when she became a widow. She lived for almost another half-century, but never remarried.

Australians were to become wretchedly accustomed to immense casualties and searing grief in the months and years ahead, but the deaths of Larkin and George Braund (the MP for Armidale who commanded the 2nd AIF Battalion) in the first days at Gallipoli profoundly shocked their fellow MPs.

Holman's memoirs referred to their 'sorrowful incapacity to comprehend the truth'. The deaths of these MPs 'cast a gloom over the House for a lengthy period', concurred a Labor backbencher.

There was an intense resolve to ensure that their deceased colleagues were appropriately remembered. When King George V sent a message of sympathy to the parliament, a special committee was formed just to compile a reply. Photographs of Larkin and Braund were prominently positioned in the parliamentary precinct. A bronze memorial was authorised for the chamber itself.



## A bronze memorial

It was unveiled at a moving ceremony on 30 November 1915, when Holman made a skilfully crafted speech that blended the contrasting backgrounds and personalities of Larkin and Braund with the early enlistments, early deaths, and unfulfilled promise that would forever unite them:

They were at the threshold of their careers, and it is impossible to foresee what would have been the result had they remained in public life. There was no position in the public life of Australia that was not open to either of them.

Larkin was commemorated in other ways. For example, at least five Sydney streets are named after him.

Jack Davis, the *Referee* columnist who knew Larkin well, had no doubt about his friend's outstanding prospects. Larkin was 'a humanitarian with a big love for the under-dog who was honest', wrote Davis. He was also 'grimly determined', and 'had ideals which time and its buffets might never have effaced'.

Davis even went so far as to compare Larkin's future potential with the dazzling promise that had been shown by none other than Holman himself. Decades earlier, as Davis recalled in June 1915, he had attended a 'most brilliant address' of 'magnetic eloquence' by Holman; it had prompted Davis to make a 'precocious prophecy' to the young cabinet-maker that he would become premier of New South Wales. Davis considered that Larkin had different attributes from Holman and his influential Sydney contemporary Billy Hughes (who was soon to become prime minister), but had equivalent political potential.

This was startling confirmation of Larkin's astonishing rise and lost future. Davis was astute, insightful, experienced and well informed. He had concluded, in effect, that Larkin could have emulated Labor's best-known politicians from New South Wales. To Davis, Larkin was a fallen star with rare attributes and exceptional promise who could have become a successful Labor leader.

## A bridge to North Sydney

Larkin's parliamentary stint had been brief. But he had shown himself to be an assiduous, popular and effective local member (not least in his persistent advocacy of a harbour bridge to North Sydney). He had already 'established a hold on the constituency that would be extremely difficult to move', the *Daily Telegraph* concluded.

The *Telegraph*'s obituary stated that Larkin was widely seen as 'a coming man'. The *Worker*'s tribute also emphasised Larkin's potential:

His life was full of bright promise ... Earnest and unassuming, fair but firm, he had all the elements that make for true success, and his untimely end will be widely deplored.

If 'my fate [is] to never see dear old Sydney again', Larkin had written from Egypt in January 1915, 'I do hope my little chaps will grow up with a strong sense of patriotism' and show it 'to the full if ever need be'. He would have been immensely proud of them. They certainly remained proud of him.

His elder son, Edward junior, had a brilliant scholastic career. He qualified as a doctor, became the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s music critic, and then travelled to England to train as a thoracic surgeon. There he switched to psychiatric medicine. He became a colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and supervised the rehabilitation of shell-shocked soldiers during World War II.

May followed Edward to England in 1933, and the younger brother, Howard, moved there, too. Howard became a wing commander in the Royal Air Force. He was awarded the Air Force Cross in 1941, and acquired the nickname 'Digger'. After being shot down, he was imprisoned in Stalag Luft III, which became famous for the 'wooden horse' mass escape. He became a successful businessman after the war. Howard was 68 when he died in 1980. May had died in England in 1963, aged 79.

Meanwhile, Edward Larkin's eminence and prominence as a psychiatrist continued to rise. He had a practice at Harley Street, served on government commissions of inquiry, and became a regular media commentator. When the first psychiatric day hospital in Britain was built, he helped design it, and became its initial director.

He was a remarkably talented polymath. Edward learned Arabic in his retirement to supplement his proficiency in Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Furthermore, he supplemented his life-long mastery of the piano by teaching himself to play the organ, violin and cello. An insightful chapter he wrote on Beethoven's medical history for a 1970 book on the composer is still esteemed.

Edward died in England in 2002, aged 94. After being just seven years old when deprived of his father, his longevity was a striking contrast to Sergeant Larkin's lot.



*A memorial plaque to Larkin and Braund was unveiled in the NSW Legislative Assembly on 30 November 1915. CREDIT: NSW Parliament.*

As I pointed out at the start, I included a biography of Ted Larkin in my book *Farewell, Dear People* along with extended biographies of nine other examples of Australia's gifted lost generation. They comprise:

- a talented engineering graduate who performed outstandingly with Mawson as an explorer at Antarctica;
- a Rhodes Scholar from W.A. assured of a shining future in the law and/or politics;
- a visionary vigneron and community leader renowned for successful wine-making at an unusually young age;
- a first-rate Duntroon graduate who was described by his brigadier as potentially an Australian Kitchener;
- a talented barrister with a vivid personality, quick wit and amusing repartee;
- a popular farmer who became the inspiration for the celebrated film *Gallipoli*;

- a brilliant footballer from Tasmania who dazzled at the highest level;
- a budding architect from Melbourne's best-known creative dynasty who combined an endearing nature with his family's flair for writing and drawing;
- and an internationally acclaimed medical researcher who was the Florey or Macfarlane Burnet or Gus Nossal that Australia missed out on because he died in the first weeks at Gallipoli while serving as a battalion doctor.

Ted Larkin, the international footballer who became an esteemed administrator instrumental in the success of rugby league, and then a rising Labor star as well, certainly deserves to be in this illustrious company.

**All quotations are from *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation* (Scribe, 2012). Sources for the quotations can be located in the *Farewell, Dear People* endnotes. *Farewell, Dear People* was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History and the National Cultural Award.**



## SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions to ASSH are due on 1 January each year. Payment in Australian dollars by Visa, Mastercard or Bankcard, or a cheque to the **Australian Society for Sports History**, should be forwarded to:

Bruce Coe,  
ASSH Membership and Claims Officer,  
c/- 3 Whiteside Court  
Nicholls ACT 2913  
AUSTRALIA  
Email: <coebb@bigpond.net.au>

### Current Membership Rates Per Annum:

■ Individual	\$50
■ Concession/Student	\$25
■ Institutions	\$100

### Life Subscriptions

■ Australia	\$500
■ Overseas	\$750

Members receive two issues of *Sporting Traditions*, as well as periodical *ASSH Bulletins* (usually two) in each subscription year.

## THE 17TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE

was delivered by Ross McMullin. This lecture was entitled *Retrieving Ted Larkin (1880–1915): Outstanding Footballer, Acclaimed Organiser, Original Anzac.*

Rugby league in its earliest years displayed clear potential, but success proved elusive until a capable administrator, Ted Larkin, was handed the reins in 1909, when he became the league's first full-time secretary. Larkin is little known today, but it was under his leadership that rugby league advanced from the unpropitious plight it was in when he took over and rapidly became the most popular winter sport in Sydney and beyond.

The 2015 Tom Brock lecture analysed the vital role of Ted Larkin:

- Illuminating how he came to be in charge of rugby league
- evaluating how and why he made it successful
- underlining how strenuously the rugby league officials tried to retain him even after he moved into another sphere with a spectacular triumph, and
- outlining what happened to him afterwards — a sequence of events that stirred profound emotion among those familiar with the circumstances.



*Tom Brock*

Published by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee  
on behalf of the Australian Society for Sports History.

