

'What are we to do with our boys?': Contrasting masculinities in early Victoria

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Among the masculine images that developed in late nineteenth-century Australia, two brothers seem to encapsulate a key contrast. One, James Burston, worked industriously and became a wealthy pillar of Melbourne society. The other, George, embodied a more relaxed, perhaps partly larrikin element in the local mythology. When one adds that the immigrant father, Samuel, cannily declined to dig for gold but set up a prosperous store on the road to the goldfields, a uniquely colonial success story begins to emerge.

On a raw July day in 1920 a crowd gathered miserably in the Queen Victoria Gardens for the unveiling of Melbourne's memorial statue to King Edward VII. To add to the onlookers' discomfort the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, who came to do the honours, was late. But he made a suitably loyal speech in praise of King Edward and the large equestrian statue, the king dressed in the uniform of a Field-Marshal heroically astride a spirited mount, became part of Melbourne's collection of modern statuary. Sadly missing from this gathering, was Major-General James Burston, who had chaired the committee responsible for the statue in the decade since the king's death in 1910. He had organized Australian sculptor Bertram Mackennel to include Melbourne's statue among the many other commissions he was receiving to commemorate Edward VII. Mackennel, who was living in England, finished the model in 1914, but was unable to get it cast because the war-time British government had taken control of all foundries. The model was safely stored and protected from enemy attack and, as soon as possible after the war ended it was cast and shipped to Australia. But James Burston was dead. He had died suddenly four months before the unveiling and so missed seeing his plan come to fruition.

It is often said that Edward VII's death and the years leading up to the Great War were the end of an era: an era of confidence in Britain and her Empire nurtured in two reigns of relative peace and progress. In recent times memories of Edward VII often focus on his amorous adventures but, at the time of his death, his loss was deeply regretted. In Australia, ideas were canvassed as to a suitable memorial to him. Victoria's premier, John Murray, deciding that any memorial would be 'a citizens' movement', placed the matter in the hands of Melbourne's Lord Mayor, Colonel James Burston. The premier was quoted as saying that, 'Some people think the memorial should be in the form of some charitable enterprise - some provision for the care of children or the treatment of consumption or cancer. This would certainly be a more useful means of perpetuating the memory of the King than the erection of the statue.' James Burston seems to have agreed with him. He called a public meeting early in June and, though there was some dissent, it was decided that a memorial fund should be raised and the money used to complete the building of the Children's Hospital. A committee was formed with Burston as chairman and honorary treasurer. Judging by letters to the press it does not seem to have been a popular decision but it must have come as a surprise to the committee when, within a week, the Children's Hospital Board refused to be associated with the enterprise. The

Board's reasons were never made explicit though there was innuendo. An official statement from the hospital published in the *Argus* (20 June 1910) referred to 'misunderstandings which have arisen in regard to the proposed King's memorial'. James Burston had no choice but to dissolve his committee and start again. He smoothed things over with the Hospital board, assuring them and the public that the choice of the Children's Hospital was not due to influence on the part of the committee (this may have been hard to do; in his position as Lord Mayor, Burston was an ex-officio member of the board!) called another meeting and this time it was decided to erect a statue. But the publicity had done him no good and perhaps it was this which lost him an, albeit closely-contested, election for his third term as Lord Mayor in October and the knighthood which might have followed.

A knighthood would have been the zenith of his civilian career: a lifetime's striving upwards, in developing Victoria where a native-born Australian with intelligence and perseverance could aim high and make his way. James was born in 1856, in Kilmore, the eldest child of Samuel Burston, an immigrant of the 1850s, the son of a west-country miller, who had operated mills in Somerset and Devon. When he came to Victoria, he ignored the immediate lure of the goldfields and, by 1856, was proprietor of a store at Kilmore. Then he tried his hand at farming nearby at Broadford but gave all that away in 1869 when he bought a malthouse and came to Melbourne.

At the end of 1857 Samuel and wife Sophy had a daughter, who died of croup. A second son, George William, was born in the midst of the family's grief. Perhaps, as a result, a special relationship developed between Sophy and the baby arriving soon after her loss. Perhaps George was spoilt and protected. Perhaps James felt isolated and developed, at an early stage, a determination to see things through and do well. George seemed amiable and easy-going but full of vigour and enthusiasm, and with totally different ambitions. Chalk and cheese they were but Victoria, as it developed from colony to state, had room for both sorts of masculinity to grow.

Kilmore in the 1860s was a lively town, well laid out and profiting from its position on the road to the goldfields of both the Bendigo region and Beechworth. The presence of a hospital board, churches, schools, and dramatic society showed the development of civilisation, though frontier days were remembered in reports of children lost in the bush and people being bitten by snakes. Occasional aborigines were seen but their presence was more of a novelty than any form of threat. Bushrangers were a threat though in the surrounding country; Samuel Burston's property at Broadford was once held up by Ned Kelly. Perhaps it was this which prompted a move to Melbourne, or was it a long and persisting drought or even a canny understanding of the importance of ale in a thirsty land? No one is sure where Samuel Burston picked up his understanding of the malting trade but certainly brewing and the production of malt was something which was traditionally well-understood in Somerset.

And so the boys' childhood was a country one with much outdoor activity and an enthusiasm for outdoor life. James F. Hogan writing in *The Victorian Review* in 1880 had some comments on where this sort of life might lead, 'The native Australian lives in a sunny land, inhales balmy air and gazes on cheerful skies.' This sort of life, he argued,

would lead to one of the chief characteristics of the native-born: ‘An inordinate love of field-sports.’ Other characteristics would be ‘A very decided disinclination to recognise the authority of parents and superiors’ and ‘A grievous dislike to[sic] mental effort’.

Earlier than this though, at the end of the 1860s, there was consternation as to the upbringing of a generation of children native-born to hard-working immigrants. They were turning out to be larrikins and ne’er-do-wells. The catch cry “What are we to do with our boys?” was debated much in the press. Marriage to ‘our girls’ was a possible solution though Marcus Clarke wryly suggested making swindlers of them. Samuel Burston’s answer was to put his boys into the business. He might well have worried about George. George was ten when the family came to Melbourne, finally living in Flinders Street, near the malthouse. It is probable, but impossible to ascertain owing to unavailability of the school’s early records, that George finished his education at the Model School in Spring Street with his friends Fred and Harry Stokes, before going to work in the malthouse. But he must have shown an artistic bent because, as a junior maltster, he went on to study at the National Gallery School of Design.

Hogan may have been correct when he argued that Australia’s climate produced young men with an inordinate love of sport. But it was not field sports which captivated George Burston and the Stokes boys: their passion was the new-fangled craze of cycling. In the sixties there were velocipede races at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and William Kernot, later Professor of Engineering at Melbourne University, performed a much-publicised ride to Geelong. Then, at the end of the seventies, high-wheel bicycles came to Melbourne and George and the Stokes brothers became addicts. So there was George, first rubbing shoulders with a bohemian art crowd, and now out riding round the countryside at weekends by day and by moonlight. Was this larrikin behaviour? Cycling was controversial, and legal battles were fought by cyclists over rights to the roads with the older-established horse traffic. The high-wheeled bicycles (‘penny-farthings’) were unsuitable for any riding except by athletic young men, and accidents were common. But there was a glorious freedom in being able to travel anywhere at will without needing to own or maintain a horse. And these cyclists meant *‘anywhere’*; they found it a particular challenge to master any terrain that had been conquered by men on foot or horseback. But controls and organization were forthcoming: clubs were formed which began to regulate dress and behaviour. The first club, The Melbourne Bicycle Club, was established in Victoria in 1878 with George as a foundation member.

Meanwhile James was getting on with his more serious life. At fourteen, he had gone into his father’s malthouse where he developed the understanding of malting and business practices that would make him highly regarded as time went on. And in 1873 he joined the army as a private in the Victorian Volunteers. Britain had officially withdrawn the last of her troops from the colonies in 1870. This does not mean that James necessarily worried about national security, though as the century wore on there was always a fear of foreign invasion. Like George, James was a sportsman and he enjoyed shooting, and Private James Burston often featured in weekend competitions as a member of the Collingwood Shooting Club. But, if his love of shooting had been an initial reason for joining the Volunteers, he took his soldiering seriously and in 1879 he was commissioned lieutenant and, from there, rose in the ranks: captain of the 2nd

Infantry Battalion in 1885; major in 1889. By now the character of the volunteers had changed; instead of being unpaid amateurs they were now a partly-paid, more regulated citizen army. As soldiers, they won high praise from Major-General Tulloch when he took command in 1889. ‘Better stuff, or men more amenable to discipline by those who know how to deal with them do not exist. The well-to-do, comfortable existence which all men worth anything enjoy in Australia seems to resuscitate the old yeoman spirit and self-consciousness of power which made the English of the middle ages so formidable.’ The Second Battalion reached a high degree of efficiency under James’ command, winning the Brassey marching and firing competition (named for the Victorian Governor, Lord Brassey) four times.

In 1883 he married Marianne McBean, a contemporary of Melba at her old school, PLC. Marianne was a good choice of wife for James, socially adept and energetic. At work, the firm was doing well. Samuel Burston had gone to England in 1879 and brought back the idea of pneumatic malting. Although there was controversy over whether this method of fermenting malt was better than traditional methods, the firm prospered with the malt made with new imported machinery. Then, in March 1886, Samuel died; a self-made man who had taken himself to a new world and made the best of every opportunity and skill he possessed. He left his thriving business and his wealth to his two sons.

What was to be done? George had no head for or love of the business. He was still obsessed by cycling. (In July 1886 he was out in the Western District trying to break the Australian 100-mile road record for the second time.) A possible answer was to float the company, which was a popular idea at the time. The *Australian Brewers’ Journal* (April 20, 1888) enthused, ‘The cry is not, “still they come,” but “they come faster and faster”. All the larger Melbourne breweries and malthouses are now owned by limited liability companies, and two Adelaide breweries are in the market this month, besides breweries at Perth (Western Australia), at Broken Hill, and in fact all over Australia.’ The Burston float of 1888 was successful with the public applying for six times the amount of shares that were available. The *Australian Brewers’ Journal* went on to say, ‘Mr James Burston has consented to act as managing director for three years at a salary to be agreed on. Mr G.W. Burston will give his services gratuitously for the first six months, his intended early retirement from the business being one of the chief reasons for the formation of the company.’

George now had his freedom as well as considerable wealth. And, though James may have wondered about him, among cyclists he was well thought of, even internationally. In 1885 he had been praised in the American magazine, the *Wheel World* as, ‘an accomplished rider who sticks at nothing that rubber and steel can surmount.’ In the eighties George decided to attempt a round-the-world adventure and, with Harry Stokes, set off in November 1886. With the help of another friend, George Thorne (who wrote the *Australasian’s* cycling notes under the name of ‘Philibuster’), the trip had great publicity and reports coming home were serialised in the paper and later became a book, *Round About the World on Bicycles*. The plan of Burston and Stokes was to ride to England (taking steamers for the necessary sea travel), via the Dutch East Indies, Burma, India, Palestine and Europe. They had finished touring England thoroughly by autumn 1889 when it became necessary for one of them (*which* one was not revealed in the press)

to return for business reasons. So it was impossible to complete their circumnavigation of the world by bicycle. They toured America by rail and returned home in December to great acclaim in the bicycle world.

It seems unlikely that George would have returned for business reasons even as warning signs of the impending depression began to be felt. In fact by spring 1891, though he was one of the firm's directors, he was off overseas again on another bicycle trip leaving James to shoulder responsibilities. The depression bit and the brewing trade was dull as people cut down on luxuries such as alcohol. But, in England, George seemed unworried. He accepted a vice-presidency of the Harrogate Camp (a high compliment, said the *Australasian*, as Harrogate was looked on as the greatest event in the English cycling year). At home, by contrast, James dealt with a disastrous fire which destroyed two storeys of the Flinders Street malthouse. Fortunately, the buildings were well-insured and, by November, tenders were called for re-building with new machinery and appliances. Early in 1892 the job was finished and the new machinery was producing good malt. It continued to do so as the firm survived the bad times of the early 1890s. It could even be said that, for Samuel Burston and Co. Ltd., the banking and land crisis, devastating for so many people, had a positive outcome. When the Land Credit Bank of Australasia Ltd. went into liquidation in 1893, George's friend, Fred Stokes, lost his job and became instead, for many years, the hard-working and much relied-upon secretary of the firm. The new century brought Federation and free trade as the old colonies turned into states. Federation was good for the maltsters; without tariffs, good barley could now be sourced from wherever it was grown and malt sold where the need lay.

In the nineties, James prospered. As his family grew, he and Marianne moved to a large house, "Carrical", in Mason Street, Hawthorn. With pride, the Burston arms (Samuel had applied for these in his visit to England in 1879) were carried out in coloured glass over the front door. "Carrical" was built on a slope overlooking the Yarra. It had a front garden with a circular carriage drive around a central rose garden and a substantial vegetable garden behind the house where the gardener was kept busy producing vegetables in season for the cook. The property went back into nearby Grattan Street and the bluestone stables opened out here. The sons had ponies; Samuel (Roy) remembered riding to Melbourne Grammar and the youngest, Gerald, rode to Trinity Grammar before being sent as a boarder to Geelong Grammar. And there were two carriages: a victoria and a brougham, in which Marianne Burston went calling, though James used the cable-tram service into the city to get him to the malthouse in Flinders Street. The family went to Christ Church, Hawthorn, the oldest church east of the Yarra and built in 1853. James was a generous parishioner and a church warden for twenty-five years. After his death it was noted that, 'His splendid example as a devout and regular worshipper, diocesan helper, and adviser, was a stimulus to every parishioner.'

But not to George perhaps who, by contrast, was living the carefree life of a bachelor, sharing a house with his mother. The existence of an eligible young man of means, like George, who could not be enticed into marriage must have added to the frustrations of the many single young women of the decade. At the time of the gold rush there had been more young men of marriageable age than women; now, at the close of the century the numbers of young women far outweighed the young men. George's situation was the

subject of conjecture. On his return from an overseas trip in 1894, *The Australian Cyclist* published a piece called ‘Still single’. It went on:

‘George Burston has come back single. Miss Hunter, of Mentone Hotel, Mentone, had an impression before he went to England that he would come back a benedict, and so sure was she that a dinner for a party was wagered on the question. So the dinner was held last Tuesday evening, and it was at Miss Hunter’s expense. Of course George’s word was taken and the lady made no demur.’

But another reason for George’s staying single was that, as they married, men tended to resign from their cycling clubs. He may not have felt inclined to do this. He became president of the Melbourne Bicycle Club in 1889. The club had increased in size and prestige in the eighties and was responsible for running the Austral Wheel Race, an important high-bicycle race, the highlight of the club’s annual bicycle race meeting held in early summer at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and second only, it was said, in sporting status to the Melbourne Cup. The ‘Austral’ attracted vice-regal patronage and much publicity. George remained president throughout the nineties and in this decade, as the ‘safety bicycle’, the forerunner of modern bicycles, replaced the old high-bicycle, cycling became enormously popular. Everyone, including women (the governor’s wife, Lady Brassey was an enthusiast), could and did ride on roads and streets which were, as yet, free from automobile traffic. George changed allegiance to the ‘safety’ and made five more overseas trips. He lived well, though always grappling with a weight problem, and was generous, good-humoured and popular. As a director of Samuel Burston and Co Ltd., he does not seem to have had much input into the business but, to his credit, he did stay home in 1897 when James, in his military capacity, went to England to attend Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee.

Then, at the end of the nineties something went out of George. In 1899 he was forty, and his mother died. He did not seek re-election as president of the Melbourne Bicycle Club. Although it had just moved into splendid rooms at 243 Collins Street and although George was much respected, it had run into trouble. In 1890 the Club had begun to award cash prizes for events at its race meetings. This attracted overseas champions and was profitable but it also attracted bookmakers and the scandal of race-fixing. And the grass track and uneven surface of the Melbourne Cricket Ground was under heavy criticism as more and more speeding riders fell. George went overseas in 1900, perhaps to escape the unaccustomed emptiness of his home, and on his travels he met Rose Carthew, a tall strong-minded woman, whom he married in 1901. The bachelor was finally caught and George retired from cycling-club life. He still rode his bicycle though and, in 1902, made a trip to the Transvaal and Orange Free State Africa to visit Boer War battle fields. But, like so many others worldwide, he was developing an enthusiasm for motor cars. The *Australian Brewer’s Journal*, which occasionally reported his activities, noted that, ‘while in Paris on his last trip to the other side of the globe, he and Mrs Burston indulged in a trial run on one of these machines... Mr Burston is a globe trotter in every sense of the world, but that does not prevent him from taking an active interest in the malting and brewing business. In spite of ‘his active interest’ in the business it is worth noting that George could distance himself from it enough to state his occupation as ‘gentleman’ on his marriage certificate, and quietly slipped out of the spotlight.

James was now really moving forward into it. Militarily, he did not get involved in the Boer War, but he ran for the Melbourne City Council in 1900 and was elected unopposed. He was chairman of the finance committee for many years, was active in the organisation of Melbourne's evolving tramway system and, as one who lived so near the river, felt strongly about beautifying the Yarra and its use as a viable waterway. The business continued to do well and, by 1908, had purchased other malting firms and operated on three sites. In 1912 Samuel Burston and Co. Ltd. joined with one of its chief competitors, Barrett Bros, Pty. Ltd. to become Barrett Burston and Co. Pty. Ltd., a firm which was to prosper for another half-century before being taken over by Henry Jones IXL Ltd. in 1980. Socially, too, the family was attracting attention. When he became Lord Mayor, the inaugural banquet he gave was a brilliant affair. At the head of the table James had the Governor-General (the Earl of Dudley) on his right and the Governor of Victoria (Sir Thomas Carmichael) on his left. The Chief Justice, the Federal Treasurer and the Premier of Victoria were further down the table among a host of distinguished guests. The grandson of a Somerset miller had come a long way; a knighthood seemed within his reach.

But then came the Children's Hospital incident and defeat in the contest for his third term as Lord Mayor. Melbourne *Punch* (which tended to be hard on James) wrote: 'After all, Colonel James Burston is to remain plain, Colonel James. It is hard that after two years faithful service, the cup of knighthood should be dashed from his lips because of one vote in the City Council.' Publicly James accepted defeat graciously but, in 1911, took a long leave from the Council and went with wife and daughters on a round-the-world trip, and gave an account of his travels to the *Australian Brewer's Journal* (20 April, 1988). He had felt 'the usual thrill that Britishers feel at the sight of the Union Jack proudly flying over Hong Kong. That pride of race is the Britisher's heritage, and a really valuable one it is.' James was to see that pride take a fall after 1914 as the Great War began and wound its disastrous way through the following years, decimating the Europe of "Edward the peacemaker". At first, like so many others, he thought the war would quickly end, and

in this confidence he accepted the high promotion to command the 7th Infantry Brigade, which he took to Gallipoli in June 1915. But here again he was disappointed; he was now fifty-nine and the situation proved too much for his health. He became officer-in-charge of reinforcements at Mudros, on the island of Lemnos, but 1916 found him in London on special leave and he was home in Hawthorn by October. Unable to take part in further action, he was promoted honorary brigadier-general and finally retired from the army as an honorary major-general in 1920. Cut short of military as well as civilian glory, he died suddenly, playing cards with his neighbours in March 1920. There was a grand military funeral. As James was finally laid to rest in a family grave next to his father's, the troops fired a salute and the last post was sounded. In the press, obituaries listed his achievements, including, at the time of his death, chairmanship of the Bank of Victoria.

George outlived him by four years, an elderly father to his three sons and possibly a spinner of great stories. One of these strayed into his obituary which, although noting his contributions to cycling added a hardly possible exploit to his round-the-world-journey, that 'in Greenland Mr Burston was challenged by some Eskimos - who, though rather

hostile to the travellers were much interested in the bicycles - to race a reindeer. From the first the race between the bicycles and reindeer seemed hopeless but, owing to the animal falling on a slippery patch of snow, Mr Burston won the race.' (*Argus*, 13 December 1924) It was typical of George to go out with a laugh; it was equally typical of James to leave with solemnities and honours. Posterity would find traces of both in the myths of Australian masculinity.