Ned Trickett - Australia's first world champion (and a Customs Officer from 1893 to 1916)
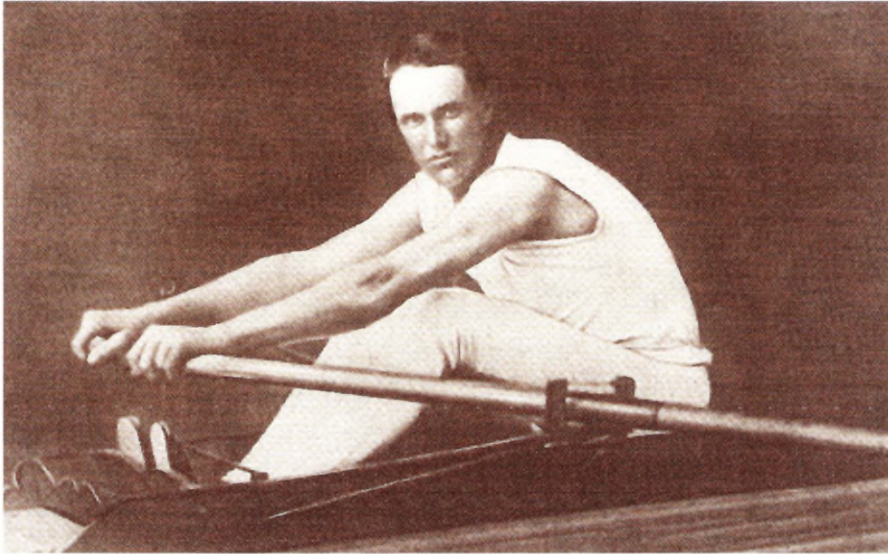

Photo courtesy of Tricket Family Collection

International sporting success is nothing new to Australia - but it was certainly big news back in 1876 when Sydney sculler Ned Trickett travelled to London and won the first international sporting championship ever taken out by an Australian.

Due to a break in the undersea telegraph cables then connecting Europe to Australia, news that Ned Trickett had won the Champion Sculler of the World Competition on the Thames River on 27 June 1876 did not reach Australia until 17 July - three weeks after the event.

Nonetheless, upon finally hearing the good news, Australia (and his home town of Sydney in particular) was simply overwhelmed with joy and astonishment. Not the least because Ned (who was born in 1851) was the son of a Sydney quarryman who had earlier been "transported" to Australia as a convict. Ned, also a mere "colonial", had beaten the very best that England and the whole world had to offer.

In his recent book *Ned Trickett Champion Sculler of the World* (ISBN 0-949622-14 published by the Lane Cove Council Library) Ned's grandson, Gordon Trickett, says of the electric atmosphere at that time:

"Ned's news spread amongst the people of Sydney like flashes of lightning in a late summer afternoon thunderstorm. There had never before been such exciting news received in the colony and it created spontaneous expressions of energetic enthusiasm and fervour. The reality of Ned's achievement awakened an awareness of Australia's potential for greatness that had never existed in the colony's short history."

Ned returned to Sydney a hero and he went on to win other sculling races both in Australia and abroad. He continued sculling for a number of years while managing hotels in Sydney and later in Rockhampton to support his growing family. He retained his world championship for over four years before losing it in 1880 to Canadian Edward Hanlan in London.

Back in Australia, and while managing a hotel in Rockhampton, Ned was caught up in the economic depression, bank closures and severe drought of the early 1890s. Along with many other businesses, the Rockhampton hotel went broke. Both Ned and his son then tried mining to make a living - but that venture also failed. He returned to Sydney in 1893 but still he could not find any work.

One day, exhausted and full of despair at how far he had fallen

from his days of glory and gripped with a terrible shame at no longer being able to support his family, Ned aimlessly wandered the streets of Sydney - alone and contemplating suicide. On hearing music he was drawn to a band playing on a street corner. After listening to Sydney barrister and Christian speaker Mr E.P. Field, Ned collapsed on the ground.

Field revived Ned and took him back to his legal rooms where they talked together for a long time.

The barrister was aware that the NSW Customs Authority was looking for men who were strong in physique, reliable and able to work for long hours. With Field's help, Ned gained employment at the NSW Customs Authority beginning work in September 1893 as a tide waiter at a starting salary of £130 a year.

After working in Sydney for just over a year, Ned was transferred to Moama - a small NSW border town on the other side of the Murray River from Echuca. He was later transferred to Corowa - also a NSW Customs border post.

At both locations, he was embroiled in the most bitter and long-lasting inter-colonial dispute of the pre-Federation era when each colony, but especially NSW and Victoria, was trying to raise government finance by levying Customs duties on each other's goods as they crossed the border or came up-river.

However, as Ned's grandson Gordon Trickett recalls: "Ned carried out his work with a good deal of humour mixed with firmness. The thing about Ned that stood him in good stead when he was under pressure in carrying out his duties, particularly when his decisions were unpopular, was that

he had maintained his fine physique."

Ned also maintained his membership of the Salvation Army and was in great demand as a speaker at church gatherings as far away as Bendigo and Melbourne.

When Federation came to Australia on 1 January 1901, the six separate colonial Customs administrations became State offices of the Federal

SCULLING MATCH ON THE THAMES, JUNE 27, 1876
JOSEPH HENRY SADLER, Champion of the World, versus EDWARD TRICKETT, of New South Wales

National Library of Australia

Department of Trade and Customs. To the great relief of traders, internal Customs border duties and border posts were at long last abolished and Ned was transferred back to Sydney.

In Sydney, Ned worked for the NSW office of Federal Department of Trade and Customs until he retired in September 1916. In November of that year he travelled to the northern NSW town of Uralla to spend some time with his son, Frederick, and other family members. While at Uralla, he was keen to try his hand once again at gold mining. Ned died in Uralla on 28 November 1916 in a mining cave-in while sinking a shaft to look for gold.

Three hundred mourners braved the pouring rain to attend his funeral. Several years later a tall marble monument was erected over his grave in the Uralla cemetery. Financed by donations from all over Australia, the monument acknowledges the fine contribution made to the sport of sculling, and to our emerging nationhood, by Ned Trickett - Australia's first world champion.