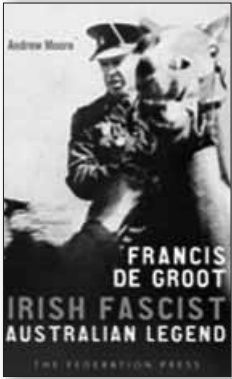


Francis De Groot: Irish Fascist. Australian Legend

By Andrew Moore | The Federation Press, 2005



Portrait of Captain F E De Groot
by F Werner, National Library of Australia.

According to the 2006 Mahlab *Law Diary*, Seven Wentworth comprises three sites, one being a level in Lord Foster's building on the corner of Phillip and Hunter Streets.

No doubt it will make its own history. For now, it can be noted that the site includes the old Lanark House, where Francis De Groot opened his auction rooms in the 1920s.

And this is one of author Andrew Moore's themes: De Groot's intervention at the opening of the Harbour Bridge in March 1932 was 'a few minutes of politics and bravado, a mere sideshow'. His main contribution was the design, manufacture and marketing of fine furniture. When David Jones opened its Castlereagh, Elizabeth and Market Street stores, all the woodwork was from De Groot, an eight-month job for £80,000.

A few years on, and the world was another place: the Wall Street crash, the leap in unemployment and the polarisation of politics across the globe. In New South Wales, the crisis was given a dramatic dose in the presence of Jack Lang, the man who was splitting Labor a generation before the DLP was conceived.

Was the New Guard, with De Groot and Eric Campbell and the rest of them, anything more than a 'Boys' Own' rabbleroising reaction to Lang? Moore has incurred the wrath of *Herald* columnist Gerard Henderson on this one. Writing on 24 January 2006, Henderson says 'the New Guard was never fascist in any sensible understanding of the term and there was never any serious suggestion of civil war in the early 1930s in any part of Australia'. He goes on to say that: 'There is no evidence de Groot was a fascist and Moore produces none in his taxpayer-funded biography'. (The publication records that it 'has been supported by the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in NSW Committee'.)

I, too, have doubts about the tag 'fascist', although for a different reason to Henderson. As Moore notes, 'In terms of contemporary fascist politics, the New Guard differed from Hitler and the German Nazis in that it was not anti-Semitic. Paradoxically, the most effective anti-Semite in New South Wales was the New Guard's most reviled opponent, J T Lang'. To my ear, if the word 'fascist' in the context of 1930s politics didn't then have an anti-Semitic flavour, it does now, and the title is unhelpful. Be that as it may, Moore puts both sides of the case, and readers can make up their own minds.

Unfortunately for posterity, it doesn't seem De Groot's horse ever got a name. De Groot's counsel, Lamb QC, offered to buy it from its owner, who refused. And whatever De Groot's status as a fascist, the horse was later bought by a German wool buyer who was a member of the Nazi party. Meanwhile, De Groot (who was not the owner) gave Lamb a bronze figure of it as a consolation. Lamb used it as a prop in 1937, when cross-examining a witness with regard to injuries caused by a racehorse.

Moore packs a lot of colour and background into this sketch. A telling incident occurred at a scout camp in the Central West of the state in November 1932. There was a re-enactment where one local, a prominent member of the posher Old Guard, played De Groot, and Lang was portrayed by none other than Sir Philip Game, the governor of the day and the man who had sacked Lang in May! Meanwhile, those members of the Bar who feel confident that the North Shore provides fertile ground for patriotism will be bemused to hear and might query the propositions that the Nazi Party's members congregated there and that Turramurra had been known in the Great War as 'Hunamurra'.

Reviewed by David Ash

De Groot's intervention at the opening of the Harbour Bridge in March 1932 was 'a few minutes of politics and bravado, a mere sideshow'.