

Dr LEF Neill: scholar, athlete and gentleman

Kyla Bremner

There is an old carved sandstone fountain by the Grandstand at the No.1 Oval on the University of Sydney's Camperdown Campus. It is in a state of disrepair with many broken pieces of stonework, cracks beginning to show and severe damage to one of the corner cisterns. It is obvious that water has not run through it for many years.



LEF Neill taken for JAK Shaw's commemorative album of the 1889 first grade football team. The inscription in the album reads: "To John AK Shaw, BA from the Sydney University Football Team of 1889. As a Memento of many victories under his leadership, and an unrivalled record during his Captaincy of Three years. Sydney, 5th Nov, 1889".

A metal plate bearing an inscription is tarnished green and is coming away from the stone below. There is no date on the fountain but it reads:

ERECTED TO THE MEMORY
OF L.E.F. NEILL B.A., M.B., CHM (SYD)
SCHOLAR, ATHLETE & GENTLEMAN

THIS MEMORIAL WAS ERECTED BY HIS COMRADES IN THE
MEDICAL PROFESSION AND FOOTBALL FIELD AND OTHER
FRIENDS

I must have walked past this memorial dozens of times before I noticed it. It wasn't until I was in my second year of graduate medicine that I stopped to look and it and read the inscription. It made me curious to know what type of man would engender such a memorial. I began to wonder who he was and how he died and why everyone loved and admired him so much.

I began to ask around the campus if anyone knew anything about LEF Neill or his memorial. No one at Sydney University Sport knew anything, and no one in the Medical Faculty had any idea even of the date it was erected. My curiosity became fuelled by a sense that a significant part of university history had perhaps been lost, and so I began to research the life of this LEF Neill so that his story could be remembered and told. This is what I found...

Leopold Edward Flood Neill was born on May 13, 1866 to parents William and Helen Neill at their family home, Chapelton Cottage, in Surry Hills. He was the seventh in a family of eight surviving children with two older brothers and five sisters. 'Leo' attended Sydney Grammar School as a boy and was a popular pupil who was active on both cricket and football teams. In 1882 Neill played school cup cricket and was the top scorer for a team that won 6 of 7 games and won the cup. He is also mentioned as having played in a great football game in 1883 against the crew of the HMS Diamond at Moore Park: "Clapin, Kenna, Neill and Wood played well and the School won by 23 points to 9". Neill continued to play in Old Boys cricket and football games for Grammar and as part of university teams against Grammar after matriculation.



Royal Prince Alfred Hospital staff and Medical School students taken in 1887. Neill is seated centre back row with the hat, to the left of AE Mills, his comrade from the Medical School and Sydney University Medical Society, his doctor at his deathbed, to whom he bequeathed 10 pounds, and who served as the secretary for the LEF Neill Memorial Fund. Another friend and bequeathee, HVC Hinder, is standing at the left end of the third row from the front. Courtesy of Anderson Stuart Building Archives.

In June of 1883, Neill began his studies at the University of Sydney. He was regarded as an excellent scholar and won a number of prizes and scholarships during his university career. In 1884 he won the Lithgow Scholarship for Classics (shared) for his work in his first year of his Bachelor of Arts and in his second year he won the Cooper Scholarship No 1 for Classics (shared). He also won the University Gold Medal for Classics for his final year Bachelor of Arts examination in March 1886. Neill completed a Bachelor of Medicine with a Masters of Surgery with second class honours in 1890 as one of the first graduates of the new University of Sydney Medical School. He was also very active in extracurricular campus life as one of the founding members and later the 5th president of the University of Sydney Medical Society.

Neill played football for the University of Sydney first XV from 1884 to 1890. The Sydney University team dominated during Neill's time and went undefeated in its regular season games between 1887 and 1889. Neill was a key team member during this time, playing on the wing, and was well respected for both his athletic talent and his sportsmanship. Football reports from this time printed in the student magazine *Hermes* speak glowingly of Neill and his teammates. A review of the 1886 football season celebrated that, "of the first fifteen, unstinted praise can be given to Lee, Neill, Tange and Jenkins. Lee and Neill, on the left wing of their scrimmage, blazed the twin comets of the season; their precision, rapidity and unselfishness were always the features of the game". Nicknames were given to team members, with Neill, Wood, Lee and Tange known as the "monosyllabic quartet". Neill scored four tries in a game against Oxford in 1888 and was mentioned as being especially conspicuous on the field.

Neill also participated as a football referee; in a game between Firsts and Burwood in August of 1887, "Neill gave satisfaction as sole umpire". Off the oval he was elected to the First Grade Selection Committee and the General Committee of the Football Club in 1886 and was re-elected to these committees until he left the team in 1890. Neill succeeded JAK Shaw as Captain of the Football Team in 1889 when Shaw left to practise Law in Scone. He remained in this position until his graduation in 1890.

Neill was a state representative in Rugby Union for NSW from 1884 to 1890. He is named as a former NSW Captain by Dr Thomas Hickie in his book *A Sense of Union: A History of the Sydney University Football Club*, and is also mentioned in an anecdotal newspaper article as having captained the inter-colonial team in 1887. In *They Came to Conquer: International Rugby Union Tours to Australia 1884 to 1966*, Neill is listed as playing for NSW against New Zealand in the second game of their Australian tour on 31 May 1884. The much bigger New Zealand side defeated the NSW "Cornstalks" by 11-0 in that game, which was played in perfect conditions at the Sydney Agricultural Ground and attended by over 4000 spectators. *They Came to Conquer* claims that, "Neill was a first choice player until 1890 and represented NSW against Great Britain in 1888", and that he was one of the "pioneers of representative rugby in Australia". The Secretary of the NSW Rugby Football Union wrote that "[Neill] was looked upon as the soundest man in our Union, whose good common sense, sound views and temperate judgment, were as a guiding star in all our Council and General Meetings".

It seems surprising that with all his sporting achievements, Neill was never awarded a football Blue for the University. Neill missed out despite being Captain of the first XV, a regularly outstanding player and a state representative and captain. This is because the football team did not become affiliated with the Sydney University Sports Union until 1890, the year Neill graduated from medicine. Had he been eligible during the time he played, however, it cannot be doubted that Neill's outstanding football career would have meant certain selection as a University football Blue.

After graduation, Neill went on to work as a medical resident and then as one of the first anaesthetists at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. He travelled to the United States in 1891 and had a short but distinguished career as a surgeon in Double Bay, then a suburb of 500 people. He was involved with the NSW Branch of the British Medical Association and the NSW Medical Union and had articles published in *The Australasian Medical Gazette*. He also had surgical appointments at the Women's Hospital and Sydney Hospital, and was a surgical tutor to fifth year students at Prince Alfred Hospital. He was involved with the Woollahra Presbyterian Church, the Sydney

Sydney University's undefeated first XV 1887.
 Back row (from left): B Newell, CL Tange, JR Wood,
 JAK Shaw (Captain), JF McManamey, P Flynn, HH
 Lee. Middle row: HE Britten, W Belbridge, PB
 Colquhoun, HH Hungerford, L Veech. Front row:
 TP Maloney, S Stokes, LEF Neill, FJ Belbridge, GP
 Barbour. SU Sport Archives



Grammar School Old Boys' Union and many charities. However, Neill's promising medical career was cut short when he died suddenly of pneumonia in January 1901, aged 34.

His obituary in the Australian Medical Gazette described him as "a fighter alike for the rights and dignity of the profession and for the claims of the sick and poor" and commented that he "left behind a record almost unequalled for one of his age...the profession has lost one of its most valued members". Lord Mayor of Sydney, Dr James Graham, who taught Neill as a student lamented, "No man in the [medical] profession gave more promise, and the Medical School turned out no more distinguished graduate. While making rapid progress, he at all times retained the regard and esteem of his fellows, who in no wise misplaced their confidence". Neill is represented in many obituaries as the ideal 'gentleman' of his time and it seems from all that was said of him following his death that Neill was an extraordinary man who, like many of his medical school classmates, no doubt would have become a key figure in early 20th Century Sydney medical and surgical circles.

Soon after Neill passed away the LEF Neill Memorial Fund was established for the purpose of erecting a memorial in his name and in June 1902 a working drinking fountain was unveiled at a University football game with great fanfare by the Chancellor of the University and many other Sydney dignitaries. Today the fountain still sits, crumbling and seemingly forgotten, by the No.1 Oval. It has been removed from its original pedestal and looks as though it will soon be so damaged that it will be unsalvageable.

Should such memorials be allowed to rot into oblivion, or should we place greater value on the history of our university community and preserve such relics? If you get the chance, go and have a look at the LEF Neill Memorial Fountain yourself and decide if we should continue to let this piece of history fall apart and be forgotten, or if it should be restored in remembrance of Leopold Edward Flood Neill, a true scholar, athlete and gentleman.

A more detailed biography of LEF Neill will be available on the soon to be launched Faculty of Medicine History website: www.medfac.usyd.edu.au



Dr Kyla Bremner (MBBS 2007) is currently an intern at Bankstown Hospital. She obtained a BA and a BSc from the Australian National University and then completed honours in English literature and Biochemistry at the University of Sydney. She completed her MBBS (Hons) in 2007. Dr Bremner is also a Blue in wrestling and has been very active in the University rock-climbing and mountaineering club.

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