

# Sir Daniel Cooper (1821–1902)

by **A. W. Martin**

This article was published:

- in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 3* , 1969
- online in 2006

Sir Daniel Cooper (1821-1902), merchant and philanthropist, was born on 1 July 1821 at Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, England, the second son of Thomas Cooper, merchant, and his wife, née Ramsden. He went to Sydney with his parents, but returned to England at 14 to complete his education at the Junior School of University College, London. In 1839 he began training for a legal career but in 1841 abandoned his studies because of failing health and joined a French-American firm at Le Havre to gain commercial experience. He returned in 1842 to work in the London counting house of his uncle, [Daniel Cooper](#).

Afflicted again with ill health, Cooper went to Sydney in 1843 and became a commercial partner of his brother-in-law, James Holt. Holt moved to England in 1845, the partnership was dissolved in 1848 and the business taken over by Cooper and his elder brother. Reputed then to be 'about the most extensive mercantile house in the Australian colonies', Cooper Brothers passed entirely into Daniel's hands in 1852 and under his direction prospered in the gold rush years. When his uncle Daniel died in 1853 Cooper inherited further wealth. He then owned extensive property in and around Sydney and held large stations in the western districts; he was a director of the Sydney Railway Co. in 1850 and a director of the Bank of New South Wales from 1847, being president in 1855-61. He was appointed to the Commission of the Peace and became a magistrate in 1851.

Cooper sat as an elected member in the Legislative Council in 1849-51 and 1855-56. In 1856 he represented Sydney Hamlets in the first New South Wales Legislative Assembly and was elected Speaker. He was a political associate of the liberal leaders, [\(Sir\) Charles Cowper](#) and [\(Sir\) Henry Parkes](#), and gave financial support to the *Empire*, which declared his political principles to be 'of so liberal a cast that, were he less identified with the great interests of property, he would be set down as a dangerous democrat'. Cooper later attributed all his interest in public affairs to Parkes's 'example and teaching'. His youth and 'party' affiliations caused some misgiving at his election as Speaker in 1856 but he fulfilled the role with dignity and skill, as members unanimously declared at a great complimentary dinner when he retired from office in 1860.

Cooper built at Point Piper a family mansion, Woollahra House, costing over £50,000; the foundation stone was laid by Governor [Sir William Denison](#) in 1856. The building was then regarded as 'a pledge of his abiding attachment' to his adopted country, but Cooper left for England in 1861 and never again resided permanently in New South Wales.

In England he continued to serve the colony. He was a powerful protagonist for reform of the London wool marketing system in the pastoral difficulties of the early 1870s. He acted frequently as agent-general for New South Wales, attending to such matters as the negotiation and supervision of mail contracts, and occasionally rendering special services such as the inquiries which culminated in the selection in 1888 of [Edward Eddy](#) as chief commissioner for railways in New South Wales. In 1881 he was chairman of the London Committee of the Sydney International Exhibition and in 1886

sat on the royal commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London. He was associated with the Royal Colonial Institute, warmly advocated imperial federation and in 1880 published *A Federal British Empire the Best Defence of the Mother Country and her Colonies*.

In 1857 Cooper was elected to the Senate of the University of Sydney and became a generous benefactor. He gave liberally for the relief of widows and children of soldiers killed in the Crimean war and organized and contributed relief funds for distressed workers in the Lancashire cotton famine. He was knighted by patent on 18 July 1857, created baronet of Woollahra in 1863 and appointed K.C.M.G. in 1880 and G.C.M.G. in 1888. He died at his home in Kensington, London, on 5 June 1902, leaving an estate valued at more than £440,000. He was survived by his wife Elizabeth, née Hill, whom he had married on 3 September 1846 and by two sons and three daughters.

A vignette in the *Empire*, 18 August 1856, depicted Cooper as 'a little man—serene, smiling and graceful ... His voice is suave and mellow, his manner winning and cheerful ... His forehead is broad and pale, telling of latent energy and decision of character ... Looking at that head one could swear its owner was a heavy subscriber to Bethel Unions and a victim to begging letters'. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 1856, Cooper had been 'able to overpower the envy which commonly attends remarkable prosperity by a temper singularly humane and generous, and manners affable and unpretending'. His letters to Parkes and others after 1861 attest his continuing liberalism.

## Select Bibliography

- *Empire* (Sydney), 20 Mar, 15 Dec 1856
- *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May, 27 June 1859, 2 Feb 1860
- 'Obituary: Sir Daniel Cooper', *Times* (London), 6 June 1902, p 10
- C. H. Bertie, 'Pioneer Families, The Coopers', *Home* (Sydney), 1 Oct 1932, pp 37, 57
- Henry Parkes letters (State Library of New South Wales).