



James Erskine Calder

From "The Members of the Parliaments of Tasmania – no. 30"
photographed by J.W. Beattie

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Hugh Munro Hull

From "The Members of the Parliaments of Tasmania – no. 24"
photographed by J.W. Beattie

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Calder v. Hull

writer *Terry Mulhern*

On Monday morning, December 12, 1881, James Erskine Calder, the Tasmanian Parliamentary Sergeant-at-Arms, made his way down Murray Street, Hobart, towards Parliament House. He was seething. Calder couldn't believe what he had just read about himself in an "anonymous" letter to the editor of Launceston's *The Examiner*.

"... a vindictive old beggar ... a mind contorted to an unnatural degree ... twisted ... Judas Iscariot ... villain ... liar ..."

And Calder knew who had written it. Hugh Munro Hull, the Clerk of the House of Assembly.

In England, Calder had attended the Royal Military College Sandhurst before joining the British Ordnance Survey. Through his father's connections, Calder obtained a colonial appointment as an assistant surveyor. He arrived in Van Diemen's Land on November 1, 1829, aged 21.

In a long and distinguished career, Calder worked his way up to become the Surveyor-General and Commissioner for Crown Lands.

Retirement didn't appeal to Calder, so in 1870, he embraced the ceremonial position of Parliamentary Sergeant-at-Arms. Despite his 73 years, Calder was still strong of body and opinion, which he was more than happy to share, especially on matters of the history of Van Diemen's Land.

When Calder reached Davey Street, he saw his nemesis, Hull. Calder strode purposefully after him and called loudly, "Are you 'Older Chum'?" Calder's booming voice broke Hull from his reverie. He stopped and turned to face his pursuer. Calder rushed up to him. "Are you the writer of the letter in *The Examiner* signed 'Older Chum'?"

Hull paused and then answered. "I may be. Are you the writer of a letter in the same paper reflecting upon me and others?" Calder shook with

rage, momentarily lost for words. Then he raised his arm and said in a steely tone, "I'll teach you!" His open-handed blow took Hull on the side of his face, knocked off his pith sun-helmet and sent Hull reeling back in shock, as much as in pain.

The newspapers had a field day. "The officers of Parliament are an unhappy family... It is a pity that gentlemen so well-known and respected as Messrs Calder and Hull... should wash their dirty linen in public," trumpeted one.

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If truth be told, the newspaper editors of Hobart and Launceston had fanned the flames of discontent for years by gleefully publishing Calder and Hull's tit-for-tat exchanges of "wordy warfare".

Calder and Hull each saw themselves as *the* living authority on Tasmanian history. Both had authored numerous historical accounts in books and pamphlets, as well as articles and letters in the Hobart and Launceston press. Sometimes, they wrote under their full names. Other times they simply used their initials, JEC and HMM, or, as in this case, they wrote anonymously.

Calder's letter of November 30 was signed "An Old Chum", while Hull's acerbic response came from "An Older Chum". This pseudonym was a swipe at Calder. While Hull was 10 years younger than Calder, Hull's parents had brought him to Van Diemen's Land as an infant in 1819, so he had lived in the colony a decade longer than his rival.

The ill-feeling between the two went back a long way. In 1874, they publicly differed over the provenance of what Calder called the "Tasmanian Hieroglyphics". This was the famous pictorial proclamation indicating that the Governor would mete out capital punishment to any man, black or white, found guilty of murder. Though it must be said, no white man was ever hanged for killing an Aborigine in Van Diemen's Land, in 1874 an example of the proclamation hung in the Royal Society of Tasmania's museum and it was attributed to Governor Davey in 1816.



Governor Arthur's Proclamation to the Aborigines, c1828-1830

Oil painting on Huon pine board

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Calder, quite rightly, pointed out that the proclamation was in fact issued by Governor Arthur in 1830. Hull wrote back to *The Mercury*, disagreeing and, despite being wrong, Hull's erroneous version of events was still believed late into the 20th century.

Emboldened by this false victory, Hull never after missed an opportunity to needle Calder. Both considered themselves expert on Tasmanian Aborigines and the Black War. Both knew Trukanini well, and when she died in May 1876, both men attended her funeral. Hull "anonymously" provided *The Mercury* with a report of the event (he left his finger prints by including details of his humorous meeting with Trukanini



Sir George Arthur

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Sir William Denison

*Photographed by J.W. Beattie
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as a young boy near Launceston in 1830). Hull also couldn't help but comment, "Among those who were specially anxious to be present was Mr Calder, the Sergeant-at-Arms, but he did not arrive till the proceedings were over."

In June 1879, Calder may have unwittingly lit the fuse leading to the events in Davey Street, two and a half years later. To celebrate half a century in Tasmania, Calder published in *The Mercury* the quaintly titled "A Sketch of the Public Service Fifty Years Ago". In it, Calder insulted one of Hull's idols, Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Arthur.

They say first impressions are lasting, and it is clear that Calder had disliked Arthur intensely from the moment he met him. In his article, Calder accused Arthur of being a tyrant, of corrupt land speculation, nepotism and of fake piety. Sparks flew

as Calder and Hull exchanged a series of heated letters to editors, each trying to have the last word.

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The explosive confrontation in Davey Street came after Calder published his "Old Chum" letter containing anecdotes about his friend William Thomas Napier Champ, the first Premier of the renamed colony of Tasmania (1856-57). In 1844, Champ was commandant of the Port Arthur penal settlement and the comptroller of convicts under Lieutenant-Governor Sir William Denison. According to Calder, Champ was "a firm, just and humane commandant".

When Champ fell out with Denison over the administration of the convict system, Calder took his friend's side and attacked Denison, who was, he said, "viewed by many of those under him

as the most imperious of governors and insolent of masters". Denison was a "bully and sycophant", Calder said.

Hull may have idolised Sir George Arthur, but he dearly loved Sir William Denison. Hull was Denison's personal clerk, and in his memoirs, described Denison as his "esteemed benefactor". Hull named one of his sons William Denison Hull. Hull let fly at Calder.

Hull had finished his "Older Chum" letter with the suggestion that "some sturdy grandson or friend" of Denison should find a "practical use of a horsewhip".

In a footnote to the letter, the editor of *The Examiner* had felt compelled to say, "We cannot compliment 'An Older Chum' on either his good taste or good sense." He was also taken aback by Hull's "coarse vituperation" and "holding up the writer from whom he differs as a fitting object for personal violence".

Although Hull suffered no real injury in the Davey Street scuffle, he saw himself as the "injured" party and charged Calder with assault. On Friday, December 23, 1881, they appeared in the City Police Court before Magistrates Tarleton and Green. An unimpressed Tarleton commented that he had known both parties for a long time and that "every sensible man in the community would regret that the case had been allowed to come into Court".

Indeed, even the Premier, William Giblin, had tried to intercede to settle the matter quietly. But Hull would not be swayed. For him, his honour as a gentleman was at stake. When asked whether the matter could have been settled out of court, Hull replied that in "past days" it would have been settled with "pistols and coffee".

In summing up, Magistrate Tarleton described the incident as "trivial". He noted that the plaintiff had provoked the defendant with a letter of an "insulting character" that was "sufficient to arouse the wrath of anyone". However, in the eyes of the law no act of violence was justified,

as it "set an example to persons in a lower sphere of life which was far from desirable". He found Calder guilty and fined him five shillings and costs. Tarleton finished by expressing a hope that "these two gentlemen would in future live upon more amicable terms to each other".

There may be another dimension to the bitterness between Hull and Calder. In 1984, when Lucille Anel collected Hull's personal reminiscences and published them, she came across an old family photograph of Hull's father, George Hull. On the front, was written "Yours ever, Geo Hull" and on the reverse was "The first or nearly first Daguerotype [sic] or photo taken in Hobart Town by Mr. Brown (late of the Corporation) and before beards were in fashion - and not a grey beard. by Geo Hull" and below that "Give one to Calder". This seems to imply that George Hull saw Calder as the "official" collector of Tasmanian historical memorabilia. Did Hugh Munro Hull see this as a slap in the face from his own father?

For Calder and Hull, the events of December 1881 were certainly not "trivial". Hobart society laughed at their expense, leaving their honour bruised and bloodied. But then came an enormous shock. Seven weeks after their day in court, James Erskine Calder had a heart attack and died. It was February 19, 1882. Did Calder then appeal his conviction to a higher jurisdiction? Perhaps so – six weeks later, on April 3, Hugh Munro Hull also suffered a heart attack and died. ☒

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