

Funeral rites for Mr. Levien

The funeral procession had been advertised to set out from 'Madowla' in St Kilda Road at 2.15pm, but due to the 'wet and boisterous' late May weather, and to the large number of representative citizens who were present to pay him the last tribute of respect, the cortege did not set out for the Kew Cemetery until 2.30. It was to be a long procession of carriages, buggies, hansoms and wagonettes, numbering among their occupants the premier The Hon. Thomas Bent, the Speaker Mr. Frank Madden¹, State Ministers, Members of Parliament, prominent businessmen, family members and their friends. Only the Prime Minister, Mr. Deakin, was absent, sending his apologies due to illness. Deakin and the much-lamented J. Felix Levien had been the last survivors of the great Service-Berry coalition of 1883-86.

At the front of the long line of vehicles, the body of Mr. J. F. Levien lay in state in the horse-drawn hearse. Both the coffin and the hearse itself was covered in wreaths, and onlookers stopped and bowed their heads as the funeral procession slowly moved through the streets of Melbourne, past the Parliament, in which he had sat as a member and as a Minister of State, before unhurriedly moving towards the cemetery in distant Kew. Protocol was important for Mr. Levien's colleagues in life and in death. The Hon. Member had been actively engaged in the political life of the colony for over 35 years and Gentlemen had been instructed to advise their drivers to take advice about where their carriages should be positioned according to seniority and precedence. Others, without access to a private vehicle, were to rely on cable car, and the horse drawn tram from Victoria Bridge to the Kew Cemetery gates.

That part of the Church of England section in which Mr Levien was to be interred, and in which Dr. Charles Strong was to conduct the service, was at the furthest point of the cemetery from the gates. The hearse and some of the carriages of the more important mourners were permitted to pass through the walls and the striking entrance gates, but the rest of the mourners shuffled along on foot.

Among the crowd that jostled for position around the gravesite were reporters for State and interstate newspapers. The reports of his illness had spread throughout the colonies since his cerebral haemorrhage the week before. For some reporters, what was foremost in their minds was who was in attendance. The funeral obsequies were given greater import through the Premier and the Speaker being pallbearers. The connection with the Prime Minister made his passing of national importance. For the Argus reporter, whose readers had longer memories, J. Felix Levien's longevity as a parliamentarian and his achievements as a politician were of greater relevance. The Argus reporter was to 'accurately' record that he had entered Parliament in 1871 as the Member for South Grange, defeating Peter Lalor. Following his re-election in 1877 there had been a challenge mounted, and with an accusation of bribery his opponent had replaced him. But, from 1880 to 1906, he noted, Mr. Levien had held the seat of Barwon, as South Grange had become, against all comers.

His death notice on the 25 May 1906 had simply given his name as Mr. J. Felix Levien. Most press reports described him more formerly as Mr. J. F. Levien.

¹ Sir Frank Madden (1847-1921) was the MLA for Eastern Suburbs from 1894. After 1904 Eastern Suburbs became the electorate of Boroondara. He was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly from 1904-17. He lived in the Kew mansion Mooroolbeek in Carson Street. He is buried in the Boroondara (Kew) Cemetery.

Historians now felicitously give him his full name: Jonas Felix Australia Goldsmid Levien. Apart from aficionados of Victorian economic or political history, his achievements as local councillor (1869-75), as a Member of Parliament (1871-76), as a Minister of Mines and Agriculture (1883-86), as the President of Royal commissions into the Coal Industry (1889-91) and Vegetable products (1885-94) are largely forgotten. So is his involvement in the foundation of the Australian Natives Association, and his directorship of many financial institutions. Similarly, the mansion 'Madowla' where he lived, which was located near Toorak road, and which was filled with his treasures has utterly vanished. Its extensive contents were advertised for auction on 10 February 1909 and included tiger, leopard and bear skin rugs, a Bluthner concert grand piano, marble statuary, oil paintings, a massive dining suite purchased at the London Exhibition, ... and the 'complete furnishings of a modern home'.

No press reports refer to his Jewish heritage, yet it is this that perhaps interests historians now. He was, reputedly, the first Jewish child born in the Port Phillip District in 1840 in Williamstown. His father, Benjamin Goldsmid Levien (1806-90) had managed the punt at the Saltwater River before moving to Geelong and was instrumental in setting up the Geelong Synagogue in spite of opposition from the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation. His brother Solomon was the secretary of the Geelong Shule in 1873 and we know that Jonas attended Jewish meetings in his electorate. Fredman, in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* contends that Jonas Levien's three sons and a daughter were brought up as Anglicans.

Today, his simple grave, with its distinctively concave marble slab simply reads:

Jonas Felix Levien
Born Williamstown
8th March 1840
Died Melbourne 24th May 1906
Aged 66 years.

Jewish visitors to his final resting place have followed traditional custom by placing a small stone on his grave using their left hand. In this way they have participated in the mitzvah of his burial and recognised him as one of their own.

References

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