



Portrait of King O'Malley, c.1901, National Library of Australia.

King O'Malley

(1858–1953)

Among the members of Australia's first Federal Parliament there was one man who probably should not have been there. His name was King O'Malley, and although no one could prove it, he was most likely an American citizen.

Despite this, King O'Malley achieved a lot for Australia, and himself, over his lifetime. He was a tireless worker who championed issues of social justice, claimed to be the father of the Commonwealth Bank and served two terms as Minister for Home Affairs. While working for his country as a politician, O'Malley also became wealthy as an insurance salesman and landlord.

This exhibition will help you explore the life, and lies, of this unique Australian politician and discover the legend of King O'Malley.





King O'Malley of America

International Exhibition Melbourne Photograph Albums,
1888, Public Record Office of Victoria.

*O'Malley, the 'Wild
Irishman' will speak
on prohibition in the
big tent in the plaza
to-night at 7:30. All
laboring men invited.*

*Morning Oregonian,
3 October 1887*

King O'Malley was probably born in Kansas in the United States of America on 2nd July 1858, despite his later claims to be Canadian. Little is known about his early life but by 1887, at the age of 29, O'Malley was working in Oregon and Washington State as an agent for the Home Life Insurance Company of New York. Although a very successful insurance salesman, he was exposed in April 1888 for selling policies by misrepresentation and shortly afterwards he left America for Australia.

King O'Malley was active in the prohibition movement in the United States. He spoke at temperance meetings, calling himself a Republican and a prohibitionist, and using the adopted moniker of 'the Wild Irishman'.





Portrait of King O'Malley, c.1901, National Library of Australia.

Early Australian days

It was not till lovely woman secured the vote that the real genius of the man was recognised and rewarded...Feminine intuition disdains the narrow reasonings of logic. Could a candidate with such lovely auburn hair be politically unsound? Plainly no.

The Argus, 2 May 1896

After King O'Malley's dubious business dealings in Oregon were exposed he boarded a boat headed for Australia. In Melbourne, O'Malley became a well-known figure at the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition of 1888 and afterwards travelled throughout Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia selling insurance. O'Malley was an expert self-promoter and regularly staged public stunts to promote his insurance business. He applied these skills in his successful campaign for election to the South Australian House of Assembly in 1896 where he stood on a platform of women's rights and the abolition of barmaids. O'Malley was defeated at the 1899 election and moved to Tasmania to continue his political career.

King O'Malley became quite wealthy through his insurance business and by investing in real estate in Melbourne. However, his future was endangered in 1896 when an acquaintance from the United States, William Moorehead tried to blackmail him by threatening to reveal the details of his life in America. O'Malley won the defamation case, but his past remained a subject of speculation for the rest of his life.





Portrait of Mrs Amy O'Malley, date unknown, National Library of Australia.

Mrs Amy O'Malley (c.1875 – 1956)

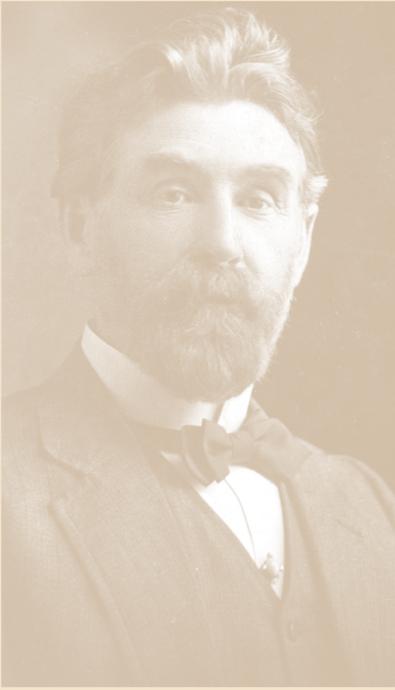
...indigestion in man or woman is not only the cause of ill-health in the individual but through that individual has a power of injury which may extend even to nations...the neglected art of cooking is essential to the benefit of mankind...

King O'Malley, *Draft of will*, c.1950

After lodging with the Horton family in Melbourne for nine years, King O'Malley and Amy Horton were married on 10 May 1910. During those years Amy had been through two court cases, one in which her father accused O'Malley of assaulting him, and another shortly afterwards against Thomas Keenan, to whom she had been introduced by O'Malley, for breach of promise.

King and Amy's married life appears to have been a comfortable one based on mutual support and companionship. King admired Amy's good sense and she helped him with his office work and rent collection. Upon their marriage King gave Amy a number of cottages so that she would have her own income and work to do. They had no children and determined that after their deaths the estate was to be sold to establish the King and Amy O'Malley Trust, which awards scholarships for students in tertiary home economics or equivalent programs.





Portrait of King O'Malley, 1908, National Library of Australia.

The Honourable King O'Malley, MHR

King O'Malley will talk to the Electors of Tasmania on the Ping-pong collared Johnnies, the Polo Tadpoles, and the Flyblown Aristocrats...

Examiner, 1 December 1903

King O'Malley was one of five members elected for the division of Tasmania in the first federal election of 1901, and took his place as a Labor member in the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. O'Malley remained in Parliament for almost sixteen years, never missing a sitting day even if he was unwell. As a politician he championed his favourite causes of a national government-owned bank of issue, old-age pensions and a Trans-Australian railway.

O'Malley was a favourite of cartoonists and journalists during his parliamentary career due to his elaborate style of oratory and his unique appearance. He had a tempestuous relationship with many members of the Labor Party, in particular William Hughes and Andrew Fisher. He finally lost his seat in the election of 1917 which was dominated by the issue of conscription. As an anti-conscriptionist O'Malley was criticised in the pro-conscription state of Tasmania for failing to clearly declare his position during the 1916 referendum.





King O'Malley, date unknown, photography by N.J. Caire, Reserve Bank of Australia Archives.

Minister of State for Home Affairs

*Red tape is the death
of genius, the funeral
of system and the
graveyard of ability.*

King O'Malley,
Barrier Miner, 14 July 1916

With the support of the 'radical' element of caucus, O'Malley was finally appointed as a Federal minister in 1910. He was given the portfolio of Minister for Home Affairs in the government of Prime Minister Andrew Fisher. His department of around 175 staff included the sub-departments of Public Works, Meteorology, Railways and the Office of the Statistician. O'Malley took to his work as Minister with vigour but lacked understanding and respect for the public service and its procedures, and he clashed with departmental staff as a result.

O'Malley held the position of Minister for Home Affairs for two terms: the first from 1910–1913, and the second for only thirteen months from 1915–16.





The Honourable King O'Malley driving the first survey peg at Canberra Hill, 1913, National Library of Australia.

Selecting a site for the Federal Capital

With the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, a capital city was required to house the new Federal Government. The States agreed that Parliament would sit in Melbourne until a site for the capital was chosen, somewhere in New South Wales but not within 100 miles of Sydney. A number of sites vied for contention until the Yass-Canberra region was finally chosen in 1908.

King O'Malley originally supported the site of Bombala, although he also voted for Lyndhurst and Tumut in various ballots on the issue. Once he was Minister for Home Affairs, however, O'Malley became a convert, likening the Canberra site to the Promised Land. This was in contrast to his previous view that it was 'a district which at times is so dry that a crow desiring to put in a week-end vacation there would have to carry its water bag'.





The birth of a continent's capitol, 1912, National Library of Australia.

The Federal Capital Competition

If an Australian can produce a design; it will be accepted; but we require the best we can get, whether it comes from Swede or Dane, from Quaker, Shaker or Holy Roller.

King O'Malley,
Hansard, 1910, p.2861

The idea of holding a competition to design the Federal Capital city had been suggested by a number of people, but it was during King O'Malley's term as Minister for Home Affairs that the competition took place. O'Malley announced the international competition on 30th April 1911. It was to be judged by an engineer, an architect and a licensed surveyor, all unnamed. The final adjudicator was O'Malley from whose decision there would be no appeal. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) argued stridently that only qualified architects and planners should judge the entries and when O'Malley refused to give in, the RIBA and its aligned institutes boycotted the competition.

Despite the boycott, 137 entries were received from fifteen countries. The judging panel narrowed the choices but were unable to reach agreement on the winners. O'Malley supported the majority decision of the panel to award first place to entry 29, the work of Chicago architect Walter Burley Griffin, although the chair of the panel had argued that first place should be given to entry 10. O'Malley then referred all the winning designs to a group called the Departmental Board to consider how to best use the designs in building the capital city, rather than merely adopting Griffin's design wholesale.

