

King O'Malley

Director's Foreword

A series of hundred-year anniversaries mark the journey to Canberra's official Centenary in 2013. The Yass-Canberra region was selected as the location for the Federal Capital in 1908, the Territory's boundary survey commenced in 1910, the design competition for the capital commenced in 1911, and the city was named in 1913. One hundred years on we have a unique opportunity to look back, perhaps even to reconnect, with the aspirations, ambitions and personalities that made the dream of a new Australian federal capital a reality.

The character, and indeed the legend of, King O'Malley endures as a central and colourful player in the story of Canberra's birth. Like other Americans in Australia in the early 1900s, O'Malley was excited by the democratic ideal and promise of a federated Australia. He quickly transformed himself from an insurance broker, with a finely-tuned sales pitch, into a parliamentarian, with a keen eye to the interests of his constituents.

Once he became Minister for Home Affairs, O'Malley was a strong supporter for the selection of the present-day site as the most suitable location for Canberra. With quasi-religious zeal, he described it as 'The Promised Land'.

O'Malley embraced his ministerial responsibility for the design competition of Canberra with enthusiasm. Endorsing the concept of a planned capital with his characteristic flourish O'Malley hoped, '... that the Federal Capital, in a few years, will rival London in size, Athens in art, and Paris in beauty.'

Though O'Malley supported the winning submission by Chicago architect, Walter Burley Griffin, he ultimately referred Griffin's design to a departmental board for revision. Like all modern cities Canberra was born of vision ... and realised through compromise.

Canberra is a city that has evolved over time but, essentially, it remains a city with ideals; it is ordered, planned and zoned. It is marked by an ever present and distinctive surrounding landscape and sedate leafy suburbs, with the neat structures of national government at its core. Social History Curator, Ms Rowan Henderson, has left no stone unturned in tracking down the stories and artefacts of King O'Malley's life. Her exhibition is both meticulous and compelling. It provides us not only with an opportunity to engage with the life and exploits of O'Malley, but also to connect, through our understanding of him, with the world in which he lived. I hope that the exhibition will also have us musing, long after we leave the building, about O'Malley's lasting influence on our capital city.

The exhibition draws upon the collections of many state and national cultural institutions, as well as generous private lenders. It also uses Canberra Museum and Gallery's own collection. I would like to thank wholeheartedly all lenders to the exhibition, and, in particular, the National Library of Australia. Mr Peter Barclay, the Managing Director of King O'Malley's Irish Pub, also deserves our special gratitude for the support he has given to the exhibition and to the publication of this catalogue.

O'Malley was not shy of controversy! His personality and position alone will ensure he remains prominent in the story of Canberra. He talked up every contribution he made and argued tirelessly for his favourite causes. The exhibition clearly shows us the popularity O'Malley gained with the press of the day.

I believe that the best exhibitions leave us asking questions and I think that this one certainly does. How, I wonder, would Canberra have been different if it had not enjoyed O'Malley's colourful support? Who are the characters today who will be seen to have shaped this city, one hundred years hence? Has the character of Australian politics and the Australian media changed, for better or worse?

Canberra's centenaries will be creative for its citizens if they stimulate us to debate the questions thrown up by our past, and provide us with fresh opportunities to reflect on the city we wish to leave to the Canberrans of the future.

Shane Breynard
Director ACT Museums and Galleries