

# **“A Veritable Augustus”:**

**The Life of John Winthrop Hackett, Newspaper Proprietor,  
Politician and Philanthropist (1848-1916)**

by

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## ABSTRACT

Irish-born Sir John Winthrop Hackett was a man of restless energy who achieved substantial political authority and social standing by means of the power gained through his editorship and part-ownership of the *West Australian* newspaper and his position in parliament. He was a man with a mission who intended to be a successful businessman, sought to provide a range of cultural facilities and, finally, was the moving force in establishing a tertiary educational institution for the people of Western Australia.

This thesis will argue that whatever Hackett attempted to achieve in Western Australia, his philosophy can be attributed to his Irish Protestant background including his student days at Trinity College Dublin. After arriving in Australia in 1875 and teaching at Trinity College Melbourne until 1882, his ambitions took him to Western Australia where he aspired to be accepted and recognised by the local establishment. He was determined that his achievements would not only be acknowledged by his contemporaries, but also just as importantly be remembered in posterity. After a failed attempt to run a sheep station, he found success as part-owner and editor of the *West Australian* newspaper.

Outside of his business interests, Hackett's commitment to the Anglican Church was unflagging. At the same time, he was instrumental in bringing about the abolition of state aid to church schools in Western Australia, which he saw as advantaging the Roman Catholic Church. He was a Legislative Council member for 25 years during which time he used his editorship of the *West Australian*, to campaign successfully on a number of social, industrial and economic issues ranging from divorce reform to the provision of economic infrastructure. As a delegate to the National Australasian Conventions he continually strove to improve the conditions under which Western

Australia would join Federation. His crowning achievement was to establish the state's first university, which he also generously provided for in his will. One of the most influential men in Western Australian history, his career epitomised the energy and ambition of the well-educated immigrant.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	vi
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	viii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	ix
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter One:</b> The family in Ireland.....	18
<b>Chapter Two:</b> Initial Years in Australia, 1875-1883.....	43
<b>Chapter Three:</b> The Church.....	60
<b>Chapter Four:</b> Hackett’s Parliamentary Career.....	94
<b>Chapter Five:</b> Road to Federation .....	157
<b>Chapter Six:</b> The Abolition of State Aid.....	202
<b>Chapter Seven:</b> The Newspaper Man .....	239
<b>Chapter Eight:</b> Friends, Family and Civic Awards.....	297
<b>Chapter Nine:</b> Hackett’s Crowning Achievement: The University of Western Australia .....	323
<b>Chapter Ten:</b> The Hackett Bequest .....	345
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	368
<b>Appendix</b> .....	381
1. Positions held within the Diocese of Perth.....	381
2. Other Committee positions.....	382
3. Hackett Studentships .....	383
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	387

## **PREFACE**

When I was searching for a thesis topic, I read Geoffrey Bolton's article 'A Trinity Man Abroad: Sir Winthrop Hackett' in *Studies in Western Australian History* published in 2000. In his essay, Bolton makes the comment that at the time of writing no one had written an adequate biography on Hackett and considering it had been nearly ninety years since his death, it would be difficult 'to penetrate his reticences'.

There were three major reasons why I decided to write the story of Hackett's life. Firstly, it is a Western Australian topic, although he did not arrive in Australia from Ireland until he was twenty-seven years of age and first visited Western Australia seven years later in 1882. Secondly, the topic was a biography and over the years I have received an enormous amount of pleasure reading such books, as people who later succeed in life, usually experience interesting childhoods. The subject of this research was to be no different. Thirdly, Hackett was a Western Australian member of the Legislative Council for twenty-five years. In my youth, I had lived in the electoral constituency of Wolverhampton South West, in the English midlands, whose then Member of Parliament was the firebrand conservative politician, Enoch Powell, and there is no doubt that my initial interest in politics occurred because of this controversial figure. It was a combination of all these three factors that attracted me to John Winthrop Hackett. So it was with trepidation I decided to take up Bolton's challenge to write a comprehensive account of Hackett's life.

Early in proceedings, I found there were no personal papers associated with Hackett, because they had been destroyed. Although for many biographers this would have been a drawback, the subject's very public lifestyle, including being editor of the *West*

*Australian*, the state's most widely read newspaper, for nearly thirty years, has meant that the lack of personal papers has been less of a disadvantage.

The challenge has not disappointed me. The more I delved into Hackett's public life the more he intrigued me, especially his holding down two challenging professional careers of newspaper editor and politician, together with numerous other community roles. Most people, when discussing the subject, know him only as a major beneficiary of the University of Western Australia. When his other achievements are revealed, people are astounded that he was such a prominent figure, especially during the halcyon days of the 1890s gold rush and the first decade of the twentieth century.

So, this is the story of a person who not only left an indelible mark on the state's first university, but has also left the people of Western Australia with several institutions that are today taken for granted. These include (notably): the art gallery, library, museum and zoo. Our community would be much the poorer without such facilities and for the reforms Hackett advocated during his parliamentary career.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADB	Australian Dictionary of Biography
BDWA	The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australia pre-1829-1888
BL	Battye Library, Western Australia
BRMPWA	Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of Western Australia
CMG	Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George
Convention Debates	Official Report of the National Australasian Convention Debates
Hillman Diaries	The Hillman Diaries 1877-1884
KB	Knight Bachelor
KCMG	Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of Legislative Council
NLA	National Library of Australia
RHSV	Royal Historical Society of Victoria
SROWA	State Records Office of Western Australia
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
TCM	Trinity College, Melbourne
UWA	University of Western Australia
WA	West Australian
WA V & P	Western Australian Parliament Votes and Proceedings
WAPD	Western Australian Parliamentary Debates
WM	Western Mail



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