
Resurrecting the Federal Ideal: Mr Astley goes to Bathurst

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As it had done all week, the *Bathurst Daily Times* on Thursday 19 November 1896 comprehensively reported the previous day's proceedings of the Bathurst People's Convention. On this particular day, however, in the column immediately preceding the extensive convention coverage, the paper prominently placed a short, seemingly insignificant article headed 'Charge of False Pretences'. The court reporter took up the story in typical house style:

On Tuesday, before Mr. Burton Smith, J. P., William Astley was brought up charged with obtaining the sum of £15 from William Freeman Kitchner [sic], at Sydney, on the 15th August last, by means of false pretences. Senior-sergeant Morris deposed that about 11 o'clock that morning he arrested accused in a room at the School of Arts Bathurst; [and] read to him the warrant ... the accused said, 'I am taken by surprise; this matter is capable of explanation'.¹

That the accused man, William Astley, was arrested and remanded immediately to Sydney, on the second day of the People's Convention, would not normally have caused even a ripple of publicity except for two pertinent facts: one, many Australians had cast a curious eye in Bathurst's direction at that time; and two, William Astley just happened to be the Organising Secretary of the very reason for that interest, the Bathurst Convention itself. While the arrest was an abrupt and ignominious end to Astley's active participation in the Convention, his political views and organising skill would continue to be felt throughout the week. This was because it was Astley who shaped the Convention's structure, its central concerns, motto, even its tone.

¹ *Bathurst Daily Times*, 19 November 1896. The charge against Astley was made by William Kitchen (a Sydney journalist), not William 'Kitchner', as reported in the *Bathurst Daily Times*.

Some of the biggest federation names were present in Bathurst in November 1896: among them Edmund Barton, George Reid, Robert Garran, Cardinal Moran and John Norton. None, however, influenced the Bathurst Convention as much as Astley; and none, with the exception of Barton, had laboured as long and as hard as Astley for the cause of federation in the seven or eight years before Bathurst—in the years when the idea of federating slowly, fitfully, took root in the colonial consciousness. Yet, in 1990s Australia, set to celebrate the centenary of its nationhood, William Astley is virtually unknown. If anyone now is aware of anything at all about him, it is not in his own name but as the *Bulletin* contributor, ‘Price Warung’. Citizens of the 1890s certainly knew Warung, both as an independent journalist and because of his prodigious output for J.F. Archibald in the periodical that became known as the ‘Bushman’s Bible’.² At the height of the *Bulletin*’s popularity, Astley (under his pseudonym) dominated its creative literature pages, supplying some eighty-four stories in the early 1890s, mostly on the theme of convictism. This represented more than a quarter of the *Bulletin*’s total output at that time. Prolific as he was with stories about the gulag Transportation System, Astley was nevertheless able, during precisely the same period, to confirm his reputation as a political journalist of talent, intellect, learning and, when the occasion in his opinion warranted it, of extraordinary vitriol.

Astley’s prominent role on the public stage of his era extends approximately from the centennial year 1888, until the publication, by John Norton in his controversial *Truth* magazine, of some thirteen new Warung short stories about Norfolk Island, ultimately collected as *Tales of the Isle of Death* and published by George Robertson in 1898. Astley would still have a role to play for his adopted town, Bathurst, into the new century, but by 1898 his energetic years were certainly behind him.

Astley’s arrest in Bathurst only adds to the numerous curiosities and incongruities surrounding him that Nettie Palmer and Barry Andrews, his two principal biographers, admirably contend with in their work. Both complain of the near absence of sources for most of his life, other than in the seminal decade from 1888 to 1898. Palmer’s husband, novelist and critic Vance Palmer, in his *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), uses the assessment of Fred Bloomfield, an acquaintance of Astley’s, to summarise the man. It is a judgement radically different to what we normally associate with circumspect literary analysis in Australia: ‘He gave you by his manner the impression that he was the confidential agent of a mysterious and hidden personality of consummate power and resource—the keeper of dark and deadly secrets it would be death to reveal’.³ Bloomfield enlarges on this Edgar Allen Poeish image of Astley by saying that ‘he was suspicious and secretive, and his temperament, as the phrenologists say, was “saturnine”’.⁴ The parallel with Poe is a useful one, for Astley, too, suffered from a relatively early age with a ‘nervous illness’.⁵ Indeed, for most of the last

² William Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Second Edition), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 137.

³ Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1954, p. 97.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Barry Andrews, *Price Warung (William Astley)*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976, p. 19.

twenty years of his life (until his death in desperate circumstances in 1911) he was addicted, as Vance Palmer puts it, to ‘his Hag’,⁶ to morphia, or opium, or both.

Despite these constant upheavals in his personal circumstances, Astley laboured as hard as virtually anyone in the country, throughout the later 1880s and 1890s, to make federation ‘*the question of the day*’.⁷ He identified two parts to his role: firstly, to reflect the will of the people while educating them about the specifics of the federal question; and, secondly, to attack federation’s enemies, whether they be England’s representatives of imperialism, or local politicians such as Henry Parkes who let extraneous issues and ego cloud their judgement. To those people who, in 1888, were publicising the cause of ‘imperial’ federation—that is, Australia integrated into a global Empire federation—Astley responded with concern for their naivety: ‘A federation between such differing nations’, he wrote in a January 1888 *Bathurst Daily Times* editorial, ‘would be the sort that follows upon the absorption of the fly by the spider’.⁸ During the years of his most prolific short-story and journalistic activity, Astley was a combative, highly informed and scholarly watchdog for federation. Supportive of the citizenry and suspicious of politicians and empires, it was only fitting that he should assume the principal organisational role in the formulation of the Bathurst People’s Convention. Indeed, all of the Convention’s concerns are anticipated by a series of Astley articles, in the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, some five years before the Convention.⁹

In order to establish Astley’s important, though largely forgotten role in the history of Australian federation, it is necessary to supply brief biographical information to form a context for the discussion of his imposing output on federation issues between 1888 and 1893. This commitment to the issue would eventually shape Astley’s creative organisation of the Bathurst People’s Convention; but, as I will show, it also serves to emphasise the severe decline of his last fifteen years from the peak of his performance, on day one of the Convention (15 November 1896), when he realised his vision of a cross-section of the Australian population discussing a union to equal their destiny, until his death in pathetic circumstances in the Rookwood Benevolent Asylum, on 5 October 1911.

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William Astley was born in Liverpool, England, on 13 August 1855. His family migrated to Melbourne in 1859, and eventually settled in the Richmond area. Barry Andrews, biographer and author of the principal critical work on Astley, suggests that the person who early exerted the seminal influence on Astley’s moral and political education was one Henry Graham—a doctor who served, from 1839 to 1850, as the medical officer for a range of forbidding penal settlements including Port Macquarie, Norfolk Island and Port Arthur. Astley acknowledged that he knew Graham ‘in boyhood and ... early manhood’.¹⁰ It seems that this experience, along with his befriending (when still a youngster) an old convict survivor of the ‘System’,

⁶ Vance Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁷ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 20 August 1892.

⁸ *Bathurst Daily Times*, 14 January 1888.

⁹ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 12 May 1891–9 June 1891.

¹⁰ Barry Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

determined the political and social stance that he would adopt for the rest of his life. As he put it in the preface to his first collection of short stories, *Tales of the Convict System* (1892):

It has been said by a distinguished Melbourne *littérateur* that the pages which record the penal chapters of Australian history ‘should be turned down’. We cannot turn them down if we would. The Transportation System has knitted itself into the fibres of our national being ... The convict past of Australia cannot be shut out of sight. No man can put his finger on the date it ended, for the reason that it glided imperceptibly into the vigorous and splendid, if imperfect, present.¹¹

Like Marcus Clarke before him, Astley regarded convictism as the theme which any serious literary craftsman in Australia had a need, even a duty to confront.

Astley was an implacable opponent of English imperialism, colonial authorities and privilege in all its forms. He was a people’s man, a Thomas Paine and John Dunmore Lang man, a citizen who happened, through the good fortunes of his profession, to be able to state publicly his views on the important issues of the day. He committed himself early to the cause of Australian independence, Australian nationhood.

We have very little solid information about Astley in his twenties, his years as a cadet journalist, other than knowing that he became a self-confessed ‘scribbling globe-trotter’¹² who helped found the *Richmond Guardian* at the tender age of twenty, in 1875. He continued in the years that followed to gain invaluable experience at the coal-face of his trade, working for papers such as the *Australian Graphic*, *Warrnambool Standard*, *Sydney Globe*, *Tumut Independent*, *Sydney Storekeeper* and *Nhill Free Press*, along with the *Bathurst Daily Times*, *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* and the *Bulletin*. One of his earliest jobs had him working, in 1876, for the *Riverina Herald* at Echuca. Barry Andrews speculates, probably correctly, that the experience of working in the border country of the Murray River, the locus of federation sentiment because of the tariffs debacle, stimulated in Astley a keen awareness of the federation question.¹³

While Astley did not have his first story published in the *Bulletin* until May 1890,¹⁴ he would have been very familiar with the journal’s strident nationalism and cultural chauvinism. Contributions such as Henry Lawson’s 1887 poem, ‘A Song of the Republic’, established the brash *Bulletin* line:

Sons of the South, awake! arise!
Sons of the South, and do.
Banish from under your bonny skies
Those old-world errors and wrongs and lies.

¹¹ *ibid.*, Preface.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴ ‘How Muster-Master Stoneman Earned His Breakfast’, *Bulletin*, 24 May 1890. See Barry Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Making a hell in a Paradise
That belongs to your sons and you.¹⁵

This first stanza of ‘Song of the Republic’ anticipates the substance of a cluster of Astley editorials in the *Bathurst Daily Times* in January 1888, in which he considers the prospects of the Australasian colonies in New South Wales’ centenary year.¹⁶

In the first of these editorials, on 14 January, he depicts the ‘nascent nations of the South’ as the ‘fly’ to imperialism’s ‘spider’:

The feeling which has prompted the late demonstration of British interest in us is pure and unadulterated Imperialism, and, barely defined, appears as the desire to enmesh these colonies in the gilded net of Imperial Federation.

An Australian democracy could be established only ‘if Australia is kept free from the paralysing influence of vicious old world institutions ... British Imperialism is not above strangling liberty itself in the interests of her aristocratic and commercial classes’. This is the language not only of the *Bulletin*, but of the old republican Titan of colonial politics a few decades earlier, the Rev. John Dunmore Lang. It is worth a mention in passing that Astley would, in 1891, commence a biography of Lang. It was never finished.

On the exact day of the centenary, 26 January 1888, Astley broadened his social agenda, warning his readers about the pitfalls of turning the anniversary into a party. The ‘chief lessons’, he cautioned, ‘will not be learnt through gaiety’, or through ‘national revels’. Here was an ideal, highly symbolic opportunity to scrutinise the progress of the political institutions of New South Wales—the upper and lower houses, executive administration and judiciary—along with religion, commerce and trade, and education. Such a course of action was necessary in a young community still in need of direction. Like so many of his scholarly contemporaries, Astley rued the baneful influence of sport, at the expense of higher pursuits:

A young Australian who plucks the highest honors conferrable by a British university, lands on his return modestly and unwelcomed, while a sculler, who propelled a piece of wood a few seconds sooner over a given distance than another man, is the recipient of a triumph such as they gave a Caesar in old Rome.

The conscious effort of Henry Parkes to use sport as a means of building his constituency is singled out by Astley for specific comment. As will shortly be shown, Astley considered Parkes a charlatan, a man motivated not by the well-being of the community but by self-gratification.

The third article in this group, of 28 January, responds to what is called ‘the most interesting—and the most important with respect to ultimate issues—of the Sydney Centennial celebrations’: namely, a gathering, organised by the *Evening News*, of

¹⁵ Henry Lawson, ‘A Song of the Republic’, *A Camp-Fire Yarn – Complete Works 1885–1900*, (ed. Leonard Cronin), Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984, p. 39.

¹⁶ See also Lawson’s ‘A Neglected History’ (1888), *Complete Works*, op. cit., pp. 52–3.

intercolonial journalists. The editorial is a fascinating one, particularly as a gauge of Astley's lofty sense of his profession. Newspapers, he maintained, are critical to the community memory; they more accurately reflect 'national feelings' than any representative group of politicians. While the public, he asserted, does not give a 'brass farthing' for 'His Excellency THIS, or the Honorable MR THAT, and His Worship the Mayor OTHER', the people do identify with the newspaper reporter:

Thousands and tens of thousands reflect the hues of the journalist's mind.
They think as he thinks, dream as he dreams, speculate as he speculates.
He shares his notion of the present, and his conception of the future with
countless scores to whom his individuality is a shadow and his name
unknown.

It is a statement replete with the zeal and optimism of the moral high ground—a passionate if flawed exhortation of belief—and one which is typical of Astley's journalism in the forthcoming years. His political tenets are unmistakable: he distrusts politicians; he believes in the rights, responsibilities and capacity of the people; he rejects Lawson's 'old-world errors and wrongs and lies'; he stoutly defends the reformist mission of the journalist; and he advocates the importance, and ultimately the necessity, of what he would soon term 'the Federal Compact'.¹⁷

The year 1891 was William Astley's most prolific. He responded vigorously to the lament of his community and temper of the times. It was a period of protracted social upheaval. The shearers, for example, began a protracted strike in Queensland in January 1891, in opposition to the pastoralists' insistence on freedom of contract (Barcaldine ignited in May); the Labor Party entered Australian politics; the seventh Intercolonial Trade Union Congress met in Ballarat in March; while Henry Lawson published his poem 'Freedom on the Wallaby' in William Lane's Brisbane *Worker* in May, maintaining that Australians

... must fly a rebel flag,
As others did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song
And join in rebel chorus.
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting
O' those that they would throttle;
They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle!¹⁸

In order to add their voice to the rebel chorus, in October 1891 the members of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union began their weekly publication of the *Hummer* in Wagga Wagga.

Two other occurrences in this same year strongly contributed to the community ferment: the convening of the National Australasian Convention in Sydney in March and April, resulting in the draft 'Bill to constitute a Commonwealth of Australia', and the resignation of Sir Henry

¹⁷ *Bathurst Free Press*, 20 May 1891.

¹⁸ Henry Lawson, 'Freedom on the Wallaby' (1891), op. cit., p. 146.

Parkes as premier of New South Wales in October, to be succeeded by the pragmatic George Dibbs. For a journalist passionate about his country and determined to reflect faithfully or, when the occasion demanded, to mould the will of the people, the year 1891 was a veritable motherlode of activity. Astley responded to the challenge. The principal recipients of his energetic output were the people of Bathurst, where Astley regularly resided during the years from 1891 to 1894.

The bulk of his journalism appeared as leaders in the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, but he did place one provocative article in the *Nhill Free Press* in January 1891, reacting to the creation in the Nhill area of a new municipality, to be called ‘the Shire of Hopetoun’ after the then Governor of Victoria, later to be first Governor-General of Australia.¹⁹ Astley was disgusted with those who made the decision, declaring that ‘local great men’, such as Sir Thomas Mitchell or George Higinbotham should have been considered. Reminiscent of John Dunmore Lang’s dry, local humour some decades earlier, Astley questioned Hopetoun’s claims, suggesting several mock reasons for this recognition, the last one being that Hopetoun has

.... since his arrival here ... performed with accuracy certain functions which a wax figure with a phonograph in its interior could have performed with an equal grace and a corresponding dignity; he has made one or two able speeches which were very obviously written by his private secretary, and he has made several indifferent ones which were, as obviously, composed by himself ...

Astley was not impressed by the domestic achievements of the man variously designated ‘the Right Honourable JOHN ADRIAN LOUIS, Earl of Hopetoun, Viscount AITHRIE, Baron HOPE, and Baron NIDDRY, &c, &c.’—and he was incredulous that such qualifications were to be:

... honored by a race of hardy colonial pioneers—by men who are fighting bravely the rude forces of nature and consecrating their energies to the noble task of making the wilderness burst into blossom—by men who have apparently cut themselves adrift from the flunkeyisms and class-falsities of the old land ...

Stirring stuff, recalling the John Dunmore Lang of the 1850 *Coming Event* lectures and the polemical Lang of *Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia* (1852).²⁰ Yet Astley’s comments resemble even more closely the visionary output, in the early 1850s, of Daniel Henry Deniehy, currency lad, democrat, republican, and yet another public figure who lists a Bathurst sojourn in his life story.²¹ In Deniehy’s case, however, he died in Bathurst in desperate circumstances (in 1865), a hopeless alcoholic, only to be

¹⁹ *Nhill Free Press*, 30 January 1891.

²⁰ For a selection, see Lang section in David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins (eds), *Our First Republicans—Selected Writings of John Dunmore Lang, Charles Harpur and Daniel Henry Deniehy 1840–60*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1998.

²¹ See Deniehy section in David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins, op. cit.

exhumed in 1888 and sent to a prime location in Waverley Cemetery. But that is a story for another paper.²²

Astley was apparently determined that the sins of the citizenry of Nhill would not be repeated by the nascent democrats of Bathurst. Having written an editorial leader in the *Bathurst Free Press*, on 3 March 1891, in praise of the high purpose of the imminent Federal Convention in Sydney and insisting on the need for ‘slow movement’, consultation and constant community discussion in the years building towards federation, Astley produced an erudite series of sixteen articles between 12 May and 9 June, in which he discussed the principal ideas relevant to a coming federation. In his recent book *Nationalism and Federation in Australia* (1994), W.G. McMinn argues that Australian federation would eventually be ‘the result, not of nationalist enthusiasms, but of a political process’.²³ Willam Astley’s articles in 1891 profoundly informed that political process, the first addressing the key issue of ‘State Rights’, three later ones expanding on the nature of the ‘Federal Compact’, three on the Senate, two on the franchise and one on the judiciary. Virtually all of the key federation questions are canvassed: ‘the doctrine of State Sovereignty’, the ‘basis of the Federal Compact’, the progress of the ‘colonies towards the coping-stone of a Federal Republic’, the need for a federation ‘with safety’ in order to ‘establish an Indestructible Union’, the necessity for the Senate to be ‘the House of Equal States’ with the ‘power to modify money bills’ and the need for ‘uniform Franchise’ in both Houses of the Federal Legislature, with ‘one vote and one vote only to every man’.²⁴ Several other miscellaneous contributions range more widely, with the Draft Bill, in particular, being closely analysed. It is journalism of the highest order. Indeed, Astley correctly asserts in his leader of 4 June 1891: ‘... no other paper in this colony has so precisely and definitely criticised the Bill—to expose the weaknesses of the measure. We have done this because we are Federalists, and look forward to the ultimate building up of a mighty nation’.²⁵

The 1891 series of federation articles established the pattern of Astley’s journalism in the following years—notable principally for the quality and scrupulous detail of the political commentary on federation issues, and the unaccommodating, on occasion waspish analysis of the leading federal figures of the day. As the arduous year 1891 wore on, Astley detected, again correctly, the increasing tendency in New South Wales towards the party-politicising of the federation issue as the free-traders and protectionists strove for supremacy. On occasion, in the *Free Press* articles, impatience deteriorates into acerbity as Astley levels his attack primarily at Henry Parkes, George Reid and George Dibbs. His most severe criticisms are saved for Parkes because, in the weeks following the publication of the Draft Bill, Parkes set about labelling opponents of the Bill as ‘Anti-Federalists’. Astley maintains that Parkes:

²² For Deniehy’s story, see, for example, Gerald Walsh, *Daniel Deniehy – a Portrait with Background*, Department of History (University College, University of New South Wales), Canberra, 1988; *Our First Republicans*, *op. cit.*; and David Headon, “‘Sons of the Morning’: Daniel Henry Deniehy’s Trustees of the Coming Republic”, in David Headon, et al. (eds), *Crown or Country: the Traditions of Australian Republicanism*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, pp. 53–68.

²³ W.G. McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p.136.

²⁴ *Bathurst Free Press*, 12 May 1891, 14 May 1891, 20 May 1891, 27 May 1891.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 4 June 1891.

... would have better shewn statesmanship by arguing people into the Bill, and by educating them to its characteristics, than by denunciation of opposition. There never was a measure before the colonies that demanded exacter, more intelligent scrutiny.²⁶

In his editorial the next day Astley relished the task of questioning the tactics of Parkes and George Reid. Both men were intent on trying to outmanoeuvre or ‘dish’ the other in a spirit, not of ‘becoming patriotism’, but of that ‘which characterises the contestants in a low-class Sydney “boxing ken”—“Smash your opponent and let the principle of the game go to”’.²⁷ Astley was having none of Parkes’ adversarial, strong-arm tactics. Typically taking it upon himself to speak for the people, he ends a long polemic with a challenge to the politicians:

The Australian colonies will not have this Bill forced down their throats. Let it be put before them with every facility for amendment ... The greatest enemy to Federation, the strongest anti-Federalist, is the Federalist who wishes to hurry the formal settlement of the problem.

This last comment was aimed squarely at Parkes. Astley made it clear in the weeks that followed that he distrusted him and felt that he was ‘discrediting Federation by his antics’.²⁸

By the early 1890s, Astley had been observing politicians in the public realm for well over fifteen years. He was no apprentice reporter. Thus empowered, he could state, in the penultimate article in this cluster—dated 8 June 1891—that:

In Democracies, as in States ruled by classes or autocrats, ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance’ ... The States which have been most marked by absence of great public scandals have been those where the eye of the public of the nation is most nearly situated to the focus, and where it is but a step from the Council Chamber and the Senate Hall to the homes of the humblest citizens.

In Astley’s *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* editorials of mid-1891 lie the foundations of the 1896 Convention—his insistence that the Draft Bill was at best faulty, at worst anti-democratic; his insistence on the necessity of debate, discussion and consultation; and his insistence on the necessity of the people being actively involved in the political processes leading to national union. For these reasons, in the coming years as the politicians fiddled while federation burned, his patience ran out. A despairing editorial, written in late 1891 at the end of what had been a turbulent year, is simply entitled: ‘Wanted—A New Party!’²⁹ Astley had had a gutful of free traders and protectionists searching for advantage at the expense of the national good and he was prepared to state it bluntly: ‘Party Government ... has infused into the veins of the body politic a subtle poison which degrades and

²⁶ *ibid.*, 20 May 1891.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 21 May 1891.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 1 June 1891.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 16 January 1892.

demoralises the whole country'. His disenchantment with politics and politicians was almost palpable.

It got worse. In his biography of Alfred Deakin, J.A. La Nauze maintains that federation's prospects at the beginning of 1892 were 'gloomy'. By year's end federalists were reflecting on what La Nauze labels the 'lowest year' of their fortunes between 1889 and fruition a decade later.³⁰ Astley blamed the complicity of leading New South Wales politicians and he attacked them accordingly, disparaging George Reid as a political opportunist and George Dibbs as a 'blunderer'.³¹ He even questioned Edmund Barton's commitment to the cause. We now know that the years 1892–3, when Barton became Attorney-General in the new George Dibbs protectionist ministry, severely tested him. In fact, one of Barton's biographers has called this period 'the most obscure and puzzling' of the politician's entire career. Astley was deeply disappointed with the apparent withering of Barton's federation commitment and he determined to re-focus him on of the great question of the day.

The result was an open letter to Barton, signed, it should be noted, by 'Price Warung' and published in the *Bulletin* on 11 February 1893. It was entitled 'The Fat Lord Justice of Federation'.³² Liberated by the pseudonym, Astley produced an emotional torrent, reminding Barton about his 'glowing ... enthusiasm' for federation in 1891, when he was 'possessed of an exaltation of mind at being among the nation-makers'. He implores Barton once again to get immersed in 'the current of national feeling' rather than keep his eyes on the rewards of public office, like Parkes who, we are told, 'long ago sold himself to Imperialism', and Sir Samuel Griffith, who more recently had 'sold himself to Caste and Privilege and Monopoly'. Both these men, Warung declares, are now enrolled 'among the Iscariots of history'. The article, several newspaper columns in length, concludes with a challenge:

The public of Australia demand a Free Federation; and your one chance of enduring fame is to become the mouthpiece of that demand. Give yourself over to the Imperialists, and though you may hereafter, as the fat Lord Justice, enjoy the emoluments of treachery in the privilege of being addressed as 'My Learned Brother!' ... by his Honor the lean Lord Justice Chief Iscariot, you and your reward shall be like the brief lives of the insects of a summer moon, which are born, and breathe, and die.

There is considerable irony in this letter that subsequent scholarship enables a present-day reader fully to appreciate. Whether or not Warung's letter influenced Barton we do not know for sure; what we do know, however, through the information John Reynolds supplies in his biography *Edmund Barton* (1948), is that during the three years from 1893 to 1896 Barton spoke at nearly three hundred federation meetings in New South Wales alone. His inter-colonial visits swell that figure to over one thousand. By contrast, William Astley virtually drops out of public sight, probably because of his drug addiction. It has been suggested that in 1894 to 1895 Astley could manage a mere ten days' work.³³ J.F. Archibald and his business

³⁰ J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p.157.

³¹ *Bathurst Free Press*, 30 October 1891.

³² 'Price Warung', 'The Fat Lord Justice of Federation', *Bulletin*, 11 February 1893.

³³ Barry Andrews, op. cit., p. 34.

manager at the *Bulletin*, William Macleod, were certainly shown to be correct when they suggested in 1893 that Astley could no longer cope with longer-term commitments.

Yet he bounces back in the years from 1896 to 1898, and it is the City of Plains, Bathurst, which provides the stimulus. Curiously, the announcement of the imminent resurgence is probably a piece Astley wrote for the *Bulletin*, published on 9 May 1896 and signed 'P.W.', written in response to the death of Henry Parkes. Entitled 'Within an Ace of Greatness', the article analyses Parkes's career, strengths and weaknesses, with characteristic insight. It begins: 'Henry Parkes is dead. For a generation past he has been a Problem: henceforth he will be a Legend'.³⁴ For Astley, there were two great divisions in Parkes' life: the period leading to 'Responsible Government in New South Wales' and the forty-odd years that followed. Up to 1856, Parkes, as editor of the *Empire* newspaper, was 'the fervent-spirited patriot, with the virile passion and sweeping imagination of a large-minded statesman'. But, we are told, in the later 1850s this man died, 'tortured to death under the weights, heavy and coercive, of debt and financial disaster'. The young democrat gives way to:

Parkes, the opportunist and historian; Parkes, who looked upon life as a fiction, humanity as a puppet, politics as a farce, patriotism and public spirit and freedom as terms with which to juggle away the senses of the people as conjurers juggle away the vision of their patrons; Parkes, the charlatan—was born.

Astley enlarges on Parkes' immoral role in the exploitation of the communal outrage prompted by the attempted assassination of Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh at Clontarf in 1868. For Astley, Parkes shamefully played the sectarian card in order to incite passions, gain publicity and ingratiate himself with those in positions of power. In the second division of his life, what assumed importance for Parkes were:

Titles, the company of titled personages, the glitter of imperialistic trumpery, of all that was symbolised by the laced coat and silken breeches of the Windsor uniform, and the ribbon and star of the Michael and George ...

It is fair comment. Deniehy, for the record, detected this tendency in Parkes as early as 1854.³⁵

Despite his untimely arrest in the early stages of the historic Bathurst People's Convention, Astley used his position as Secretary to shape the style and mechanics of the event. Bathurst's convention did not cater solely for politicians but included a solid range of the colonial community; debate did not confirm the usual spread of motherhood motions but informatively probed fundamental federation questions; and delegates—all delegates—signed the one Convention register. With his hatred of titles and trumpery, it must have heartened Astley, in the aftermath of the Convention, to review the alphabetical register and find, right next to Edmund Barton, the name of J.B. Barclay, of Wickham; next to Robert Garran, one John Gillies of West Maitland; next to His Eminence Cardinal Moran, Ninian Melville of

³⁴ 'P.W.', 'Within an Ace of Greatness', *Bulletin*, 9 May 1896.

³⁵ David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins, eds, *Our First Republicans*, op. cit., p. 138.

Ashfield; and rubbing register shoulders with John Quick was the less illustrious but no less deserving E.A. Parnell, of Kelso. Astley would have been encouraged, too, by the fact that at his trial (charged by Sydney journalist William Kitchen with obtaining £15 by false pretences), held some three months after Bathurst, he was acquitted—clearly aided by a campaign against Kitchen waged by John Norton’s *Truth* newspaper. Apparently because of the disclosures about his private life, Kitchen took his own life.³⁶

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When called on several years later to promote Bathurst’s claim to being the national capital, in a booklet published in 1901, Astley proclaimed the city’s unique credentials based principally on its crucial role in 1896:

It was ... the energies, and the money, and the public spirit of Bathurst men that took the question of Federation when it was virtually a dead issue and gave it new and vigorous vitality by the People’s Federation Convention ... that Convention ... placed the Federal movement in such a position that the people of several provinces became the propelling and guiding agents, and not the politicians. The force of the impulse communicated by Bathurst has never been lost ... Before the People’s Convention, the movement was one for the politicians to juggle with ... That body made the issue the dominant one of Australasian politics, and to it, and to it alone, is ascribed, even by the very politicians whom it compelled to march along with it, the resurrection and the revivification of the Federal Ideal.³⁷

In *Bathurst—the Ideal Federal Capital* (1901), ‘Price Warung’ makes a series of bold and largely credible claims about the town’s vital federation role. Certainly something happened between the malaise of the early 1890s and the momentum of 1897–9 that rescued what seemed a lost cause. Helen Irving argues convincingly, in *To Constitute a Nation* (1997), that during this period the people assumed a strong sense of ownership of, and commitment to, federation.³⁸ Credit an embattled journalist with an opium addiction for playing a significant role in that process. When Mr Astley went to Bathurst, he took a goodly bunch of the Australian people with him.

³⁶ Barry Andrews, op cit., p. 33.

³⁷ ‘Price Warung’ (William Astley), *Bathurst—the Ideal Federal Capital*, Glyndwr Whalan, Bathurst, NSW, 1901, pp. 16–17.

³⁸ Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation—A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 134–55.