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## The Lion of the Avon

Speaking for myself, having unbounded faith in the colony, our public debt is small; our colony is large; our resources are many and varied and our chief wants are population and capital and I verily believe that, under a wise and bold policy of public works, these wants will speedily be supplied.

Hon. George Throssell, Member for Northam, address in reply to the governor's opening speech of the first Western Australian Legislative Assembly, 20 January 1890

HUGO THROSSELL WAS BORN INTO A tough, resilient pioneering family on 26 October 1884. He was surrounded by older brothers and sisters in the family's low, rambling house, Fermoy, which was situated at the meeting place of two rivers – the meandering Avon, with its colony of white swans imported to remind the early settlers of their British homeland, and the Mortlock – close to the small town of Northam, Western Australia. In the 1880s, Northam was the jumping-off point for explorers, farmers and prospectors heading further east into the vast undeveloped frontier land. The town lay 60 miles from Perth, capital of the colony, which had been founded five decades earlier.

Hugo was the youngest son of George Throssell, known as the 'Lion of the Avon' and the 'Lord of Northam', and his wife, Annie, née Morrell.



Both the Throssell and the Morrell families had been among Western Australia's first settlers. George Throssell was born in Fermoy, County Cork, Ireland, the second son of Michael Throssell and his wife, Jane Ann Ledsam.

Michael worked as a soldier and a policeman before signing on in 1850 as a member of the British Enrolled Pensioner Force to act as a guard for convicts being transported to assist the free settlers in Western Australia as the latter struggled to establish the Swan River Colony. With his wife and three children Michael sailed from Britain aboard the 650-ton barque *Scindian*, which was carrying the first of its thirty-seven shipments of convicts to Australia. That first voyage lasted for eighty-nine days; the *Scindian* arrived at Fremantle on 1 June 1850 with seventy-five male convicts and 200 other passengers, including 163 pensioner guards and their families.

Michael received an immediate appointment as a gatekeeper of the convict establishment in Fremantle, for which he was paid £30 per year. By 1853, however, he was back in the police force, this time in Perth. But only a year later tragedy struck the Throssells when Michael's wife, Jane, died, aged only forty-four, followed one year later by Michael himself, aged forty-six, leaving four children. George, the eldest, was just about to turn fifteen.

Apparently undaunted, George sailed with his young sister, who had been born in Western Australia, and two brothers for Adelaide, where he arranged for his sister to be looked after by relatives in South Australia and for his brothers to live with other family members in New South Wales. Then, alone and short of money, George returned to Perth. There, as Donald Garden wrote in *Northam: An Avon Valley History*, 'the young teenager was thrown onto his own resources in the Colony; he was to prove more than equal to the challenge. In fact Throssell epitomises the nineteenth century ideals of the self-made man of humble origins who rose in the world by hard work and sober devotion to duty and self-improvement'.

George began by acquiring a job with W Padbury and Company, which exported agricultural products to Singapore, India and London and later ground the state's wheat through its Peerless Flour Mills. George also studied at night, at the Swan River Literary and Debating Society. At the age of twenty, he was promoted to manage the branch office of Padbury's at Guildford, the pioneer settlement upriver from Perth, in the fertile Swan Valley.



Annie Morrell's mother was known throughout the huge family as 'Big Grandma'. She was born Susannah Summerland in 1822 to a Quaker family in Lancashire, Britain. With her parents and eight brothers and sisters she arrived in the fledgling colony of Western Australia in May 1830 aboard a small sailing ship called the *James*.

Just over a year later the Morrell family also arrived, in another small sailing ship, the *Eliza*. John and Anne Morrell, and their eight children, aimed to be farmers, and, after two or three attempts on the coastal strip around Fremantle, they decided to go further inland.

There was an early tragedy when Anne died, about a year after they arrived, but John remarried two years later and pressed on with his plan. Eventually, he and his family arrived at the confluence of the Avon and Mortlock rivers and took up a land grant of 4600 acres.

By 1836, John Morrell had built Morby Cottage, a good-size house with framed and glazed windows and a snug fireplace, on the northern side of the present township of Northam. After clearing the scrub nearby, the family was soon ploughing rich river land.

Other settlers quickly followed, including the Summerlands. In 1839, Susannah Summerland and Richard Morrell married and moved to a new farm west of Northam, where they proceeded to raise another big family – eleven children altogether, including Annie.



George Throssell and Annie Morrell met in 1860. Later in the same year Richard Morrell, Annie's father, wrote, somewhat tersely, to his daughter's suitor:

Dear Sir

I received your note respecting your correspondence with Anne which of course I was aware of and have no objection to, for though I am but slightly acquainted with yourself yet I know you would not hold the good opinion of Mr Fannomer and others if your conduct and character was otherwise than what it should be, therefore I leave Anne to please herself in the matter.

Yours etc etc

Richard Morrell

And so, in June 1861, George Throssell, aged twenty-one, married nineteen-year-old Annie Morrell. Three months later they travelled over the hills from Perth to their new block of land in Northam. George established a general store and took the job of postmaster. The store, he said later, was started with nothing except 'hope, energy and a good wife'.

From this humble beginning George built a business that eventually dominated Northam and far beyond, and made a fortune. He gradually bought up blocks of land in the town and agricultural holdings nearby followed by land far beyond Northam. He was thus poised to profit from the huge pastoral growth to come. He later became a land developer, carrying out Northam's first subdivision; he named the new area Throssellton.

The store proved to be extraordinarily well placed when, in 1887, a major gold strike occurred at Golden Valley, 170 miles east of Northam. The town became a major train terminus: the railway was built from Perth to carry diggers through the hills to this jump-off point for the long trek through the wheatbelt and into the salmon gums and red, dusty desert country of the

diggings. George seized the day. As one of his sons, Lionel, reminisced later:

The sight at Northam station was exciting . . . as each train drew in with its hundreds of miners, prospectors, etc after the arrival of the steamers at Fremantle where, by judicious advertising and distribution of literature, they were advised to make their purchases at Northam . . . What trade this rush brought! Horses, pack and riding saddles, picks, shovels, sieves and general supplies, all of which were in tremendous demand.

George's farms produced the wheat that was ground into flour at his steam mill by the river and bagged for the diggers. He introduced new types of seed wheats from South Australia to increase yields from the harvest and imported large numbers of fruit trees to produce fresh fruit for the diggings.

Business pollinated business. George gave credit to small farmers, pocketed their interest and bought their produce. As a building contractor he erected the town's buildings. He pushed for manufacturing industry for Northam and shared in the production of ploughs and chaff cutters, strippers and tree pullers, and other agricultural machinery. He helped to establish blacksmiths and wheelwrights, turning out buggies, traps and wagons, and was behind the businesses in which horses were shod, harnesses made and carters engaged to shift the huge volumes of goods travelling out to the goldfields.

In 1890 a huge Throssell emporium was opened in Northam, with a celebration banquet for 200 people. George also established a branch at the goldfield itself; diggers either bought their supplies passing through Northam, or they stocked up at the other end of the journey. And, either way, George prospered.

The Lion of the Avon ruled his town and the district. If he wasn't doing business and making money he was busying himself in civic affairs and running practically everything in town. After joining local boards he helped to found the Northam Municipal

Council and became mayor of Northam, ruling from the solid red-brick town hall for seven years. Then he moved into state politics, elected to the new Legislative Assembly in 1890 and holding the seat for fourteen years, winning five elections and being opposed only once.

For a brief three months in 1901 he was also the premier of Western Australia.



Hugo Vivian Hope Throssell was the thirteenth of fourteen children born to George and Annie. His older sisters adored him as a mischievous little boy with a happy grin. These were times of big families and long strings of names soon contracted. Hugo was known by everyone in the family as 'Jim', while his elder brother Frank Eric Cottrell was called 'Ric'. This brother, two years older than Hugo, was Hugo's best friend, the closest person in his life both as he grew up and as an adult. Ric was Hugo's 'boon companion, protector and idol', according to the former's nephew. 'Hugo the brilliant, Eric the reliable,' summed up an army officer later. Another family member claimed that the brothers were like the biblical characters David and Jonathan, devoted to each other.

The Bible figured large in the life of the Throssells. 'My father and mother loved the Bible and read a chapter and had breakfast with the children all their lives', wrote their daughter Evelyn.

He never discussed business on Sundays & let it be known that he didn't encourage visitors on that day, although mother & he would welcome anyone away from the home . . . All toys were gathered up on Saturday afternoon until Monday & we didn't think it a hardship. Now don't think our Sunday was a morbid one – my father used to say: 'Let it be a sunny day'.

We always had all cooking done on Saturday so the maid could be free to go to church – and also when prayers were read each morning the maid came in and took her place.

For years George and Annie regularly hitched up a buggy and rode out a few miles from Northam to visit and read the Bible to an old couple who could neither read nor write themselves. The Throssells' devotion to their religion can be glimpsed today in the handsome memorials to them in the settlers' small St John's Anglican Church, built in 1890.

Hand in hand with this strict religious observance was a devotion to the temperance movement, which influenced the children enormously. Hugo was said later to have had his first ever nip of whisky the night before going into battle on Gallipoli. Before the war, the *Northam Advertiser* reported admiringly: 'Like the old lion, Jim prefers aqua purer [*sic*] or a drop of tea to any kind of microbe killer and so far it doesn't seem to have hurt him much'.

George had been converted to the temperance movement in the 1870s, despite earlier being granted a gallon licence to sell 'colonial wine' from his store and holding in part the licence for a pub.

But Northam by the end of the 1860s had gained a reputation as a hard-living town and, as one resident wrote, 'In summertime it is well known there is no district over the Hills . . . [in which] there more drinking than in our little Town'. There were other complaints that it was becoming almost impossible to find a sober labourer or tradesman in the place – fertile ground for those opposed to the demon drink.

In 1873 a prominent lecturer, the Reverend William Traylen, arrived in Northam and addressed a meeting in the Mechanics Institute on '“The Chemistry and Power of Alcohol” (With Illustrations)'. He tried to form the Hope of Northam Good Templars Lodge and enlist young men of the town to take the pledge along with George Throssell.

None was impressed until the Reverend Traylen again returned to the town to try again. This time, as Evelyn Throssell reported:

Several young men apprentices and other lads were taking too much drink and Mr Traylen appealed to them to sign the pledge.

One young man said to him: 'If you get Mr Throssell to sign we will' (six of them).

After this had been told to Mr Throssell, he carefully weighed the matter and realizing his very grave responsibility he said 'For these young men on the threshold of life I'll sign and make one to form the I.U.G.T.'

He gave up his licence there and then – not transferred it – and with his wife put their whole heart into the temperance movement and when thirteen people could be got to likewise (the number required) the Independent Order of Good Templars was established with the first meeting being held in the Throssell dining room.

It must have been a great financial sacrifice for money was scarce in those days and there were six children at that stage to care for.

However they took their stand on the side of temperance, total abstinence and never relinquished their interest (with) Mrs Throssell taking over the Band of Hope . . .

The Throssells stuck to their beliefs even when they moved into their grand new mansion on Northam's Nob Hill and began to entertain governors and their wives with receptions attended by 300 guests at a time. Evelyn wrote that they 'never offered anything intoxicating to the vice regal guests although it was thought by many it would not be possible to entertain their excellencies without wine. Then, after breakfast, the family prayers were read with the approval of the honoured guests who honoured their host for doing so'.

George had moved his huge family from the rambling single-storey house near the riverfront to a magnificent two-storey home again called Fermoy, after his birthplace in Ireland. The handsome building still stands on 5 acres, at the core of St Joseph's School, which has over 300 pupils. The ground floor is shaded by a colonnade supporting a series of arches. Sweeping steps lead to the upper floor, where there is a wide cast-iron-framed veranda. The family lived upstairs; the servants and the store rooms were below. Hand-carved marble fireplaces reflect the family's affluence, as do the hand-painted stained-glass panels with chaste Victorian



maids depicting spring, summer and autumn, and an old man bent double with a bundle of firewood as winter.

Next door on a 17-acre site, George's successful merchant second son Lionel would build his own mansion, Uralia, which still exists. The huge single-storey Federation house with its wide veranda is where Hugo would also return to later.

As a young boy Hugo was first taught at the Fermoy mansion by the family governess, Miss Amy Carleton, and then attended a small state school in the town (which George had been contracted to build in 1878). It was an easy, carefree childhood, apart from the strict rulings of a stern yet indulgent Victorian father. Hugo had his own horse to ride down the hill and across the river flats from the stables behind the mansion. He also had a dog, and even a pet monkey, which abruptly disappeared after biting its owner while being fed. As Hugo's son wrote, Hugo 'survived his father's indulgence, the pampering of a gentle and loving mother and a household of sisters without being spoiled, saved perhaps by his generous good nature and an innate sense of adventure'.

Attendance at school also saved him from harm when an alarming intrusion at the Throssell home caused a major sensation in Northam and beyond on 5 May 1894. His mother and sister were at Fermoy when an obviously demented man called at the mansion looking for a job. Hugo's mother hailed a passing policeman for help, whereupon the man pulled out a revolver and fired it twice. The first shot hit the policeman in the knee; the second, aimed at his heart, was luckily deflected when it struck his pocket watch. The man then chased the Throssells inside, where they hid in a bedroom before he turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

Hugo grew up in a remote part of the British Empire on the eve of Federation, and not long before the Boer War.

In 1896, the year in which Hugo was sent away to boarding school in Adelaide, in Melbourne the Reverend WH Fitchett was preparing to publish a book that became a sensation throughout the English-speaking world. *Deeds That Won the Empire* was a

collection of tales about important events in British history and great heroes like Nelson and Wellington. A sixpenny edition sold 100,000 copies outright, and by the time Hugo left school the book had gone to fifteen editions and was almost compulsory reading for any teenager. In his preface, Fitchett predicted what was to come. It was almost a call to arms, an invitation to future heroes to step forwards:

War belongs, no doubt, to an imperfect stage of society; it has a side of pure brutality. But it is not all brutal. Wordsworth's daring line about 'God's most perfect instrument' has a great truth behind it. What examples are to be found in the tales here retold, not merely of heroic daring, but of even finer qualities – of heroic fortitude; of loyalty to duty stronger than the love of life; of the temper which dreads dishonour more than it fears death; of the patriotism which makes love of the Fatherland a passion.

Hugo was going off to a boarding school at which these values would be reinforced. He was to attend a Methodist college named after a son of the old queen herself: Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh. Hugo would learn such heroic values as loyalty, duty and patriotism, and would develop the mindset of a hero, embracing valour, honour and selflessness before death.