



Francis De Groot's Sword

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Have you ever been watching telly when a reporter or presenter has been talking to the camera and all you can see is some bonehead in the background trying to get into shot. You'd think they'd have better things to do with themselves. But Australia actually has a longstanding tradition when it comes to stealing other people's thunder, and one of the most famous examples involves a bridge, a horse and a man who was armed but not exactly dangerous.

This National Treasure is part of a private collection in Sydney.

This treasure usually only comes out for charity fundraising events, but the owner has very kindly agreed to let me get my hands on it today.

Have a look at that. This is the sword that once belonged to Francis De Groot, an Irish immigrant of Dutch heritage.

Now De Groot was a successful antiques dealer, a monarchist and a right wing ratbag. And that's a combination you don't hear every day. And riding a big ugly horse called Mick and waving the sword in the air, De Groot successfully upstaged the New South Wales Premier at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

It's quite a well known story, but what happened afterwards to De Groot is just as fascinating.

1932, the heights of the Depression. After nine years the Bridge was finally complete.

This engineering masterpiece, now on the National Heritage list was a leap towards a modern Sydney and the city was buzzing.

But the opening ceremony on March 19 wasn't the only reason.

Now the New South Wales Premier, Jack Lang was a working class hero and a nationalist but he was on the nose with the monarchists.

He'd already suspended New South Wales' interest payments to the British banks to prop up our economy.

But when he then announced that he wanted to open the Harbour Bridge, instead of the King's representative, the Governor-General, the monarchists went ballistic.

Right-wing militias formed to combat Lang's perceived Communist push. De Groot belonged to one called the New Guard, and rumour had it they were planning to kidnap the Premier.

On the day of the bridge opening, De Groot dressed in his World War I military uniform, snuck into the official procession. Then at the very last minute he leapt past Lang, slashed the ceremonial ribbon, and declared the bridge opening the name of the decent and respectable citizens of New South Wales. He was then whisked away by police. The ribbon was hastily retied and Lang finally got to have his moment of glory.

But here's the not so well known bit, De Groot's protest was far from over. He was looking forward to his day in court.

The first thing the authorities tried to do was have him declared insane.

No chance.

De Groot had been a leading Sydney businessman for more than 20 years and the Governor General had been one of his clients.

When that didn't work they tried to do him for carrying an illegal cutting weapon. His barrister Ernest Lamb was able to prove that De Groot was holding the sword in such a way that it could only be used for thrusting, not cutting.

Next!

Well what about offensive behavior?

Lamb dug up an archaic law that said any of His Majesty's subjects was allowed to remove any object, even a ribbon which barred progress on the King's highway.

It was all too much for the magistrate who found De Groot guilty. He was fined five pounds and ordered to pay four pounds in costs.

Ironically the guilty finding meant that legally De Groot and not Lang had opened the bridge. The trial was all part of a calculated plan to embarrass Jack Lang.

De Groot had an offence for every charge, and to top it all off, he then sued for false arrest and won. He was awarded 68 pounds, so he actually came out 59 pounds ahead on the whole affair.

Francis De Groot returned to Ireland in 1949 and died 20 years later.

In 2004 collector Paul Cave bought the sword from De Groot's nephew and returned it to Australia.

Two months after opening the bridge, Jack Lang's controversial nationalist policy saw him sacked by the governor Sir Phillip Game. With their supposedly Communist enemy defeated, the right wing militias quickly died out, but in true ratbag fashion, Francis De Groot's name lived on, and for some time afterwards, official road and bridge openings in New South Wales were regularly upstaged by pranksters doing a De Groot.

Out. Idiot. Get a job!

Francis De Groot is still Australia's most famous party crasher, and that makes the sword that slashed the ribbon that unofficially opened the Sydney Harbour Bridge a National Treasure.