

BENJAMIN SHEPPARD (1876 -1910), sculptor, was born in London on Dec. 3rd. 1876, son of an English father and French mother. Showing early talent, at the age of 12 he won a prize for drawing. Admitted to the Cope-Nicols Painting School in South Kensington in 1891, he was penniless, daily walked several miles to and from school, and ate irregularly. However his was a classic story of "talent will out". Only two years after starting formal art training, at the age of 17, he won a bursary to attend the Royal Academy Schools. He won the Academy Medal, and upon graduation in 1896 he did a "poor man's" version of the Grand Tour of Europe - by bicycle - as far as Rome.

Sheppard emigrated to Tasmania to join his sister Mary and her husband A.W.L. Southern (then master of the State school at Bismarck - now Collinsvale), and arriving on his twentieth birthday, he lived with them for two years. Unfortunately after he moved to Hobart, bushfires on New Year's Day 1900 destroyed the Bismarck Schoolhouse, and with it all of Sheppard's paintings, papers, and academy studies to date except for the few pictures already sold.

It was inevitable in Hobart's small community, rather self-consciously striving for a cultural life, that the presence of a talented London-trained artist would be noticed. In 1898 he was commissioned to paint a small mural (still extant) in St. Mary's College and another, larger one, in St. Joseph's Church (since obliterated). Similarly, his appointment in 1900 as Art Master at the eight-year-old Hobart Technical School was not surprising. Noted as an energetic and inspiring teacher, he had among his pupils Mildred Lovett and Florence Rodway, both of whom went on to make an important contribution to Australian art.

In 1901 he married Elsie Rose Morrisby, a talented pianist and eldest daughter of a socially noteworthy family. Sheppard himself was a violinist of no mean order, and the marriage was commended in the press as a "marriage of the arts". The next year, on October 1st., their only child, Benjamin Alleyne, was born.

Sheppard worked prolifically despite his heavy teaching commitment. Portraits included the Agent-General Sir Phillip Fysh, K.C.M.G., (which the artist presented to the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, where it is still on permanent display), and State Premier Sir Neil Elliott Lewis, MA KCMG, as well as 60 portrait supplements for the Launceston Weekly Courier . A much-admired large painting "The return of Colonel Cameron and the first Tasmanian contingent sent to the Anglo-Boer War", took 18 months to complete (there is no record of its present whereabouts).

Sheppard taught himself "modelling", so as to teach a course requirement at the Tech. In 1903 his plaster statue of King Edward VII was placed outside the Treasury Buildings. It disintegrated, but the commission had given him invaluable experience. In August that year, he won the commission to execute a Memorial to Tasmanian Soldiers in the South African War, to be erected in Hobart. He returned to London in early 1904, to carry out what was undoubtedly his best piece of work. On February 1st., 1905 the Memorial was unveiled with great fanfare on the Hobart Domain, where it still stands. An unusually sensitive piece of work in what is normally an uninspired genre, it received generous acclaim both in Britain and Australia. A replica was erected in Halifax, Yorkshire.

During 1905, joined in London by his wife and son, Sheppard enjoyed the life of an artist on the rise, with portrait commissions, work exhibited in the Academy, and election to the Society of British Sculptors. However in mid-1906 the good fortune which had marked his career deserted him - he contracted tuberculosis. After a year in sanatoriums, he went to South Africa on medical advice. There was a period of remission, and by 1909, working and exhibiting again, he achieved considerable acclaim there too, becoming a foundation member of the Society of Professional Painters, and receiving portrait commissions. Then his health failed rapidly, and on March 18th. 1910 he died, widely mourned and eulogised. He is survived by his son who lives in Sandy Bay, Tasmania.

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18/2/05.

PLUS Sundry unidentified newspaper and periodical clippings in the possession
of Mr. Ben Sheppard, the artist's son (NO PERSONAL PAPERS).

R.H. EWINS