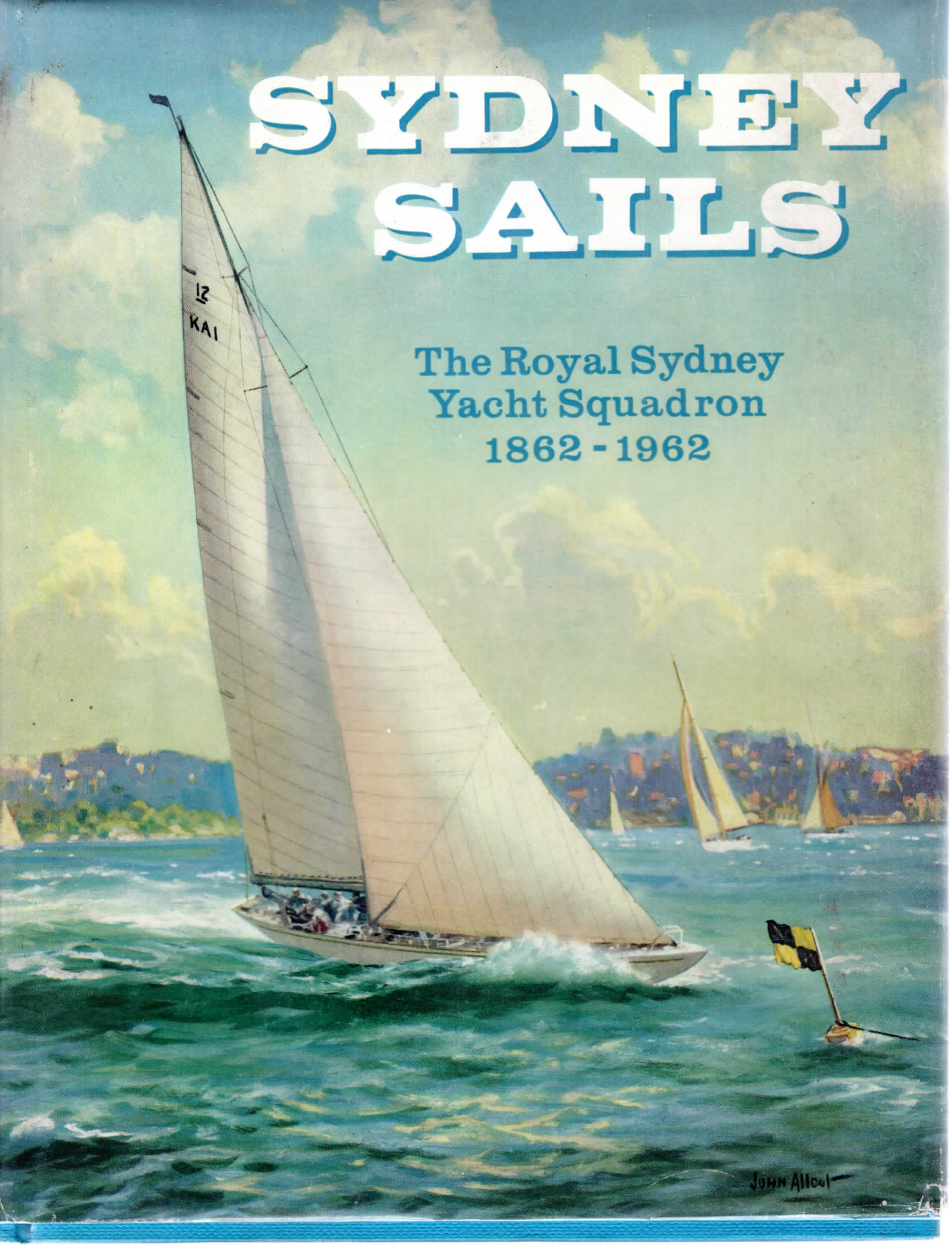


SYDNEY SAILS

The Royal Sydney
Yacht Squadron
1862 - 1962



Sydney Sails

*The Story of the Royal Sydney Yacht
Squadron's First 100 Years
(1862-1962)*

Compiled for the Squadron's Committee
by
P. R. STEPHENSEN

WITH A PREFACE BY H.R.H. THE PRINCE PHILIP
DUKE OF EDINBURGH, K.G., K.T.



ANGUS AND ROBERTSON
Sydney, Australia

2. *The Ensign shall not without our authority in writing be worn on board any vessel belonging to the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron while such vessel is lent on hire or otherwise to any person not being a member of the Club, or who, being a member of the Club, is not a natural-born or naturalized British subject.*

This amendment of the Admiralty warrant presumably applied at that time to vessels on the register of all those yacht clubs throughout the British Empire which had been authorized to wear the blue ensign. It carried a penalty of up to £500 for breach of its provisions. Under the British Merchant Shipping Act of 1854, officers of the Naval or Military Services and Customs were authorized, in the event of misuse of a flag, to board vessels and "haul down any such Jack, colours, or pendant" which would become forfeited to the Crown. There is no record of any such action being taken under this amended Admiralty warrant in Australia; its chief purpose was obviously to prevent yachtsmen who were not British subjects from using the blue ensign: a contingency that would have been extremely rare in Britain, and even more so in Australia.

At the annual meeting of the Squadron in August 1894 Dr Elliott stood down from the office of rear-commodore in favour of Dr Alexander MacCormick, owner of *Thelma*.

At this meeting an important amendment of the rule governing the admission of yachts to the Squadron's register was unanimously carried: "No yacht used as a working boat, or let to hire, or which in the opinion of the Committee be otherwise unfit, shall be allowed to belong to the Squadron. All yachts must be decked and measure at least three tons by the 1730 Rule or $2\frac{1}{2}$ rating by Y.R.A. measurement."

The Y.R.A. measurement was of the British Yacht Racing Association, which had adopted the L.W.L.-Sail-Area formula for standard handicapping. The chief significance of the new Squadron rule was in permitting smaller yachts to join, since, previously, 5 tons Customs measurement had been the minimum. However, the provision that all yachts must be decked would continue to exclude "dinghies" and "open boats". The new rule also clarified the exclusion of "working boats", possibly because some owners, under stress of the financial crisis, may have hired out their yachts, on occasions, for cruising.

The opening of the 1894-5 racing season saw a formidable challenger to *Thelma* in "A" class contests. She was *Iduna*, which had been built at Sydney six years previously, to the design of Walter Reeks, for an owner at Melbourne. Now she was bought by a member of the Squadron, W. McPherson Cameron, who brought her back to Sydney. She was rated as 24

under Y.R.A. measurement, and immediately established herself at Sydney as a vessel to be reckoned with.

Iduna was entered in the Squadron's "All Yachts" handicap race on 12th January 1895, in which the competitors were: *Iduna*, scratch; *Thelma*, 5 mins; *Iolanthe*, 17 mins; *Isea*, 18 mins; *Bronzewing*, 33 mins; *Bul-Bul*, 35 mins; *Ione*, 40 mins; *Lahloo*, 40 mins.

The yachts started level on the harbour course, with time allowance to be made at the finish, and it is evident from the handicaps that these were fixed by the Squadron's handicapping committee not by rigid rule, based on rating, although rating was taken into consideration.

Thelma won outright, crossing the line seven minutes ahead of *Iduna*, and ahead of *Isea* by 27 minutes, *Iolanthe* 28 minutes, *Bronzewing* 34 minutes, with *Bul-Bul*, *Lahloo*, and *Ione* finishing last in that order. The race was an interesting comparison of sailing speeds in light and gentle breezes, since *Thelma's* time for the course was 4 hours 26 minutes 36 seconds. On allocation of time allowances, the second prize went to Cockshott's *Bronzewing* and third place to *Iduna*.

While such a system of handicapping prevailed, it was not surprising that only the keenest yachtsmen entered for races. Yacht racing had ceased to attract its former public interest, the more so since horse racing as a "spectator sport" was now highly organized and was providing a counter attraction.

Early in 1895 Dr MacCormick was successful with *Thelma* in winning the Gascoigne Cup, and had thus made a brilliant debut as a yachtsman. There was no doubt that *Thelma*, in her class, was the speediest yacht that Walter Reeks had so far designed.

In the "over 20" rating class, Alfred Milson's *Era* remained the biggest and best sailing yacht at Sydney, but with her rating of 41, had to concede large time allowances to all other yachts. She crossed the line first in the concluding Squadron race of the 1895-6 season, but had to yield the prize to *Iduna*, which had an allowance of four minutes.

At the Squadron's annual meeting in August 1895 James R. Fairfax stood down from office, and the Hon. R. H. D. White was elected commodore, with Dr Alexander MacCormick as vice-commodore, and W. McPherson Cameron as rear-commodore.

The worst of the financial crisis had passed, but yachting had not fully recovered from it and remained temporarily in the doldrums until after the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the sport was kept alive by the enthusiasm of its relatively few devotees.

Soon after the opening of the 1895-6 season a match race, under Squadron rules, was held between *Iduna* and *Thelma*. On the day appointed the weather was so rough and squally, with winds at gale force, that the

Manly steam ferry service was suspended. It was reported next day that the water police had rescued not less than fifty men from capsized boats. Nevertheless, Cameron and MacCormick insisted on starting. The race was followed by Commodore White in s.y. *White Star*. The competing yachts sailed the course in close company, alternately taking the lead, but the storm increased to such an extent that the commodore exercised his authority and stopped the race.

An occasion of outstanding interest in 1896 was the second visit to Sydney of Lord Brassey, in his world-famous yacht *Sunbeam*, in which he had visited Australia nine years previously. Lord Brassey had been appointed Governor of Victoria and in October 1895 had arrived at Melbourne in *Sunbeam* in order to take up his vice-regal duties. Political preparations were then being made for the federation of the Australian colonies, with a consequent unification of the defence forces of the several States. Lord Brassey's cruise from Melbourne to Sydney in April 1896 was presumably connected with these naval affairs.

The distinguished yachtsman and former Civil Lord and Parliamentary Secretary of the Admiralty was entertained at Sydney jointly by the Squadron and the "Prince Alfreds" on board a chartered steamer, s.s. *Yarrawonga*, but a regatta organized in his honour was ruined by a south-westerly gale of such force that the sailing and rowing races had to be cancelled.

In this year another notable visitor to Sydney, though less celebrated at the time, was Captain Joshua Slocum in *Spray*, a 37-foot yawl of 14-foot beam and 9 tons register. Captain Slocum, a hardy Nova Scotian, earned enduring fame by sailing *Spray* single-handed round the world, a voyage which he completed in just over three years, being the first to do so. His epic story, *Sailing Alone Round the World*, is a classic in the history of yachting. In this book Slocum recorded his impressions of Sydney Harbour:

"Summer was approaching and the harbour was blooming with yachts. Some of them came down to the weather-beaten *Spray* and sailed round her at Shelcote [Shell Cove]. . . . The harbour was alive with boats and yachts of every class. It was, indeed, a scene of animation hardly equalled in any other part of the world. . . .

"At Sydney I was at once among friends. . . . The typical Sydney boat is a handy sloop of great beam and enormous sail-carrying power; but a capsize is not uncommon for they carry sail like Vikings. . . . Everybody owned a boat. If a boy in Australia has not the means to buy him a boat he builds one, and it is usually one not to be ashamed of."

In the above description of the "typical Sydney boat", the author was obviously referring to the spectacular craft of the Sydney Flying Squadron.

Slocum, after his voyage round the world, continued single-handed deep-sea cruising until he and *Spray* disappeared without trace during a voyage from the U.S.A. to South America in 1909. Slocum was then sixty-five.

In 1896 several new yachts appeared on the Squadron's register, among them *Antidote* (a large vessel owned by Alexander Oliver); *Herreschoff* (owned by James Cox); and *Meteor*, a yacht built in New Zealand by Charles Bailey, and sailed to Australia by Dr Power, Dr Williamson and A. T. Pittar. *Meteor* was of remarkable proportions, in that she had a length overall of 41 feet, a waterline of 28 feet 6 inches, with a beam of only 7 feet 5 inches and draught of 5 feet 6 inches. Her boom was 30 feet long, with the gaff in proportion, and she carried a jackyard topsail. Because of her relatively short waterline she was rated as only 3.8 under the Yacht Racing Association's rule, and this gave her a formidable advantage in handicap racing.

At about this time, two noteworthy ocean cruises were made by yachts on the Squadron's register. One was a voyage by *Archina* (Captain H. F. Harris) to Hobart and back, believed to have been the first cruise by a Squadron yacht on what was later to become one of the world's great ocean yacht-racing courses. *Archina* was considered to have done very well on the return passage from Hobart to Sydney, which she made in five and a half days. The other noteworthy pleasure cruise of this period was a leisurely voyage by a Squadron member, F. Rae, in *Jess*, to North Queensland and return. Coastal cruises were made also in the ageing yachts *Electra* (then owned by Carleton Kelly), and *Oithona*, in which the Hon. Dr Charles Mackellar, who had been appointed a member of the Legislative Council, regularly cruised for pleasure, inside and outside the harbour.

The Gascoigne Cup in 1896 was won with the aid of a substantial time allowance by James Cox in *Herreschoff*. In 1897 the cup was won by Dr MacCormick's *Thelma*.

At the annual meeting of the Squadron, in August 1897, Dr MacCormick (*Thelma*) was appointed Commodore; W. McPherson Cameron (*Iduna*) vice-commodore; and Alexander Oliver (*Antidote*) rear-commodore. These three flag officers, all enthusiastic helmsmen of their own sailing yachts—though *Antidote* was a pleasure cruiser and not a racer—remained in those offices for three years, until the close of the century.

At the Squadron's "opening of the season" evolutions in October 1897 fourteen sailing yachts turned out in two divisions. The port division was led by the commodore in *Thelma*, and the starboard division (in the absence of *Iduna*) by Rear-Commodore Oliver in *Antidote*. The other yachts participating included some elderly vessels with new owners, and some new yachts. They were: *Electra* (Carleton Kelly), *Archina* (N. M. Cohen), *Oithona* (Dr Mackellar), *Meteor* (Dr Williamson), *Isea* (W. M. Marks), *Herreschoff* (James Cox), *Mabel* (C. E. Newman), *Akarana* (J. S. Abrahams), *Lahloo* (W. H. Murrell), *Bronzewing* (H. M. Cockshott), *Freda* (E. Hungerford) and *Louelle* (A. Blix). This was by no means the Squad-

ron's full strength, since, apart from steam yachts—which were standing by only as observers—there were always some sailing yachtsmen who did not like flag-signal manoeuvres. However the occasion drew an eloquent comment from J. R. Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The newspaper stated that the manoeuvres organized by Dr MacCormick had enabled the spectators to realize in some measure the fascination of the pastime, and added, somewhat grandiloquently, "It not only suggests to the reflective mind the supremacy of England on the sea, but to some extent records evidence of the why and wherefore of that greatness. If one looks at the way in which yachts are handled, even in these waters, one soon realises that many forces are at work which tend to the growth of patriotism, the development of physique, the stimulating of judgment and promptitude in emergency—four of the main factors which have contributed so largely to the British nation's becoming the power on the seas."

The first Squadron handicap race of the season, in November 1897, introduced a new rule, banning square topsails, and permitting only fore-and-aft canvas, including topsails. As this rule took effect, it profoundly altered the appearance and manner of handling racing yachts which had prevailed for at least half a century, and prepared the way for the modern rig of racing yachts, in which topsails and topmasts, and the setting of topsails by sending a hand aloft, have become obsolete.

In that race *Thelma* was first home, with more than her time allowance to spare, and won the trophy. Second prize went to A. A. Griffiths's *Jess*. The third yacht was none other than the fourteen-year-old *Sao*, now re-conditioned and given a new name, *Actaea*, and owned by F. Woolcott Waley. The fourth place went to young Walter Marks, who was now the proud owner of *Isea*, while James Cox's *Herreschoff* and W. H. Murrell's *Lahloo* brought up the rear.

In a race for first-class yachts for the Commodore's Cup, over a 29-mile course to Botany Bay and back, in a rough sea, *Iduna* turned the tables on *Thelma* by defeating her by 33 seconds after giving her 9 minutes time allowance at the start. The sightseers on the following steamer, the *Bruce*, apparently had a shaking up for the *Australian Yachtsman* reported: "The *Bruce* bucked and kicked and tumbled, and stood on her head, and sat on her tail, and performed generally in an alarming manner . . . complexions varied from Mr Alfred Milson's cheery pink, to a pale white; the prevailing [colour] was yellowish with a tendency to green. We saw Sid Wilson [R.S.Y.S. Secretary] wading bravely about in sea-boots succouring beauty in distress perched disconsolately on the cabin top."

At the turn of the year 1898, the Gascoigne Cup was won for the second time by Commodore MacCormick's *Thelma*. In this season Dr MacCormick

presented a trophy known as the Squadron Cup. It was to be awarded to the yacht with the season's best record in all Squadron races. The trophy was to be held by the Squadron until won outright by the same owner with the same yacht in three consecutive seasons. Its first winner, in the 1897-8 season, was Vice-Commodore W. M. Cameron, with *Iduna*.

An interesting challenge match, for stakes of £100, was sailed in March 1898, between Dr Williamson's cutter *Meteor*, rating 3·8, and H. M. Cockshott's lug *Bronzewing*, rating 2·5, over a harbour course of 17½ miles. Under Squadron rules, *Bronzewing* had a time allowance of 3 minutes 56 seconds. The match was for two wins out of three races. In this contest, *Meteor* was sailed by a professional helmsman and *Bronzewing* by Walter Reeks. The first race was sailed in light airs which scarcely gave the yachts steerage-way, and the second race, two days later, in a moderate breeze. *Meteor* won both races, with a margin on each occasion of a little more than three minutes above her handicap.

During that year (1898) James R. Fairfax was knighted in recognition of his many services to journalism, charity, the arts, and sport. He was then sixty-four years of age, and continued for many years thereafter to take a keen and leading interest in the Squadron's activities and development.

The New Year, 1899, saw the nineteenth century drawing towards its close, with political plans well advanced for the federation of the Australian colonies into a Commonwealth of States, the result of prolonged debates and conferences for many years previously. To most Australians, it seemed that Federation would bring into existence the Australian nation of "one continent, one people, one flag", under the British Crown, and hopes were high for future progress.

In the yachting fraternity of Sydney, the chief interest was in a new yacht *Fairlee*, of low rating, owned by a Squadron member, T. W. Bremner. *Fairlee* was tested in a Squadron Challenge Race on 14th January 1899, against *Isea* (Walter Marks), *Herreschoff* (James Cox), *Actaea* (F. W. Waley), *Meteor* (then owned by Dr Elliott), and *Bronzewing* (H. M. Cockshott). These were all smart yachts with keen owners and crews. *Fairlee* was outsailed in light airs, the prize going on handicap allowances to *Actaea*, with *Isea* second and *Bronzewing* third.

Thelma, already with a long list of victories to her credit, later in January further distinguished herself by winning the Anniversary Regatta for the fifth successive year.

The race for the Gascoigne Cup (to Long Reef, Narrabeen and return) on 11th February 1899 produced a curious incident. The rounding mark had not been placed in correct position at Long Reef, when the leading yachts—*Fairlee*, *Herreschoff*, *Actaea*, and *Isea*—arrived there, but was placed in position for other yachts which had conceded the time allowance

New Zealand, as he said, "to show what the barbarous Australians had done to him". (She was still sailing at Auckland sixty-two years later.)

The Gascoigne Cup in that season (the early months of 1900) was won by Brockhoff's *Aoma*, but the New Zealand yachts did not have things all their own way. The Squadron Cup was won by *Isea*: this was a feather in the cap of Walter Marks who, aged twenty-five and owner of a yacht that had been sailing on Sydney Harbour for eleven years, had reconditioned her to such effect that she was adjudged to have the best racing record among the Squadron's yachts of that season.

In August 1900 Dr MacCormick stood down from the office of commodore which he had held for three years. He had enlisted as a surgeon for the war in South Africa. The new commodore was Earl Beauchamp, Governor of New South Wales and owner of *Bronzewing*, the first vice-regal holder of that office. W. McPherson Cameron, owner of *Iduna*, was re-elected vice-commodore, but Alexander Oliver stood down from the office of rear-commodore in favour of Dr J. F. Elliott (owner of *Meteor*).

At the opening of the season, in November 1900, a new trophy was announced, the Carleton Cup, presented by T. H. Kelly, Senior, a leading citizen of Sydney whose son, T. H. Kelly, Junior, aged twenty-five, had in that year joined the Squadron and bought the old yawl *Electra*. The Carleton Cup was for perpetual annual competition for yachts over 10 rating, on a course which included an ocean stretch: the cup to be the property of the Squadron, but held for twelve months by the owner of the winning yacht each year.

The first race for the Carleton Cup was sailed on 17th November 1900, by *Iduna*, *Thelma*, *Oithona*, *Electra*, *Jess*, *Isea*, and *Actaea*. The victory went to Dr MacCormick's *Thelma*—his last race before leaving for South Africa.

Now the nineteenth century was at its last gasp. It was a century which had seen one of the most far-reaching changes in human history. It had witnessed the invention of the steam engine for industrial power, locomotion, and marine propulsion. It had seen the rise of Britain's power, based on industry and naval and mercantile supremacy, and the establishment of the greatest empire in the history of the world. At the century's end the venerable Queen Victoria, aged eighty-one, after having reigned for sixty-three years, was still on the throne. Her son, Edward, Prince of Wales, aged fifty-nine, had been patron of the Royal Sydney Yach Squadron since its inception. The Squadron could look back on thirty-eight years of activity, during which the sport and pastime of yachting at Sydney had passed through many changes, but had steadily developed as an organized activity to become a regular feature of the life of Australia's first city.

Now, as the new century dawned, Australian troops were abroad fighting in the war in South Africa, while the chief public interest at home was in the elaborate preparations for the proclamation of the Australian Commonwealth. This was to be made at Centennial Park, Sydney, on 1st January 1901—the first day of the twentieth century.

Great had been the growth and development of the Australian colonies during the century that was drawing to its close. The population had increased from some 5,000 in 1801 to 3,700,000 in 1901. An island continent of 3 million square miles, which at the beginning of the century had been almost completely unexplored, was now fully mapped and substantially occupied as a new home for Europeans. Its rapidly-growing cities possessed all the amenities of civilization, including the arts, crafts, trades, professions, industries, and sports of the Australians' faraway ancestral lands. It was a time for retrospect and also for looking ahead.