

FRANK'S FIRST DAY

by Paul Brennan

The monument in this story is in Sydney, Australia. It stands at the corner of the Royal Botanic Gardens facing Shakespeare Square, opposite the Mitchell Library.

Frank the boy left school on the Friday. He had hoped that Lady Luck would turn him into a man by the following Monday but Christmas got in the way. For one thing, he had to wait for the new year to start his first job: apprentice letter cutter in stone.

While waiting, Frank worried if his biceps would be strong enough and how heavy the hammer might be. Can you spit if you get dust in your mouth? Are you allowed to talk at work? How do you ask questions, politely?

Night after night Frank dreamed he was facing his new master who had a Henry Parkes beard and the voice of his old headmaster, rattling with weariness.

“Show-me-your-hands, boy!”

Frank stuck them out, expecting the cane to fall, then turned them over as if for a dirty fingernails inspection.

“Piss on them, boy. Ammonia hardens them up.”

Frank shivered like a newborn pup.

“So you want to be a monumental letter cutter,” said the menacing master. “It can’t be for the money or the pretty girls.”

Finally, Frank’s first day arrived. It was January, 1950, and the early morning haze promised another hot Sydney day. Frank packed two sandwiches and a bottle of cordial into his new brown Gladstone bag. He neatly folded his stonemason’s apron. He had made it himself out of a canvas mailbag, snaffled from his brother’s work. The stencilled words GPO COMMONWEALTH PROPERTY were still visible. He had used

copper rivets to fasten one of his father’s old leather belts as a waistband. The apron hung down to his brown boots, its corners scalloped and its edges handsewn with red twine. It sported a solid brass buckle fit for a horse’s harness. He was ready.

He caught the bus to the city and walked through Hyde Park, practising his walking-to-work walk. He checked the Anzac memorial for words cut in stone. Two brown granite dedication stones with gilded letters caught his eye. High up in the sandstone pediment, cut out in relief, was 1914-1918 surrounded by a wreath. He walked past the Archibald Fountain, all bronze and polished brown granite, but no words. Then down Macquarie Street, on the Queen Victoria monument, he spotted more gilded letters on polished grey granite. SYDNEY HOSPITAL announced itself in letters nearly a foot high cut into a sandstone architrave. The statue in front of the Mitchell Library declared Flinders had:

SKILFULLY CHARTED A LARGE PORTION
OF THE AUSTRALIAN COAST.

Must have been difficult to chisel letters so small. What happens if you hammer out too much stone?

As he approached the Botanic Gardens he could hear jackhammers and compressors down at Woolloomooloo cutting out a new expressway.

Mr Bramm was sitting on his slabs of sandstone, sipping from his Thermos lid. He stood up and brushed the dust from his right hand on to his trousers. They shook hands and mumbled their names. Mr Bramm cocked his ear to the pneumatic drills.

“They’ve got nine hundred feet of sandstone to cut out. We cut out only a few inches. And with much less noise.”