

ROBERT HENDERSON CROLL, THE FIRST VAWC PRESIDENT, 1923-1925

ROBERT HENDERSON CROLL (1869 - 1947)¹, author and public servant, was born about midnight on either 4 or 5 January 1869 at Pleasant Creek (Stawell), Victoria, fifth child of Charles Croll, goldminer, and his wife Janet, nee Henderson, both Scottish born. An introspective and sensitive boy, he was educated at Stawell State School and in September 1886, after passing the clerical examination for the Public Service, was appointed to the Public Library of Victoria. He remained there, reading voraciously, for five years until he transferred as junior clerk to the Education Department, where he stayed for over forty years. He became a firm administrator, and retired as senior clerk at 65, having been registrar of the Council of Public Education for thirteen years. He had also been secretary of two royal commissions and had occasionally written speeches and articles for premiers.

One only has to search the internet with keywords R. H. Croll to see the vast amount of information on this most prolific of persons. And of course, from our own VRWC perspective, we can lay claim to part of his activities as history shows that he was the inaugural president of the newly formed VAWC club in the formative years of 1923-1925.

As a young man, Bob Croll became a harrier with Melbourne Harriers. After several years as an athlete, Croll and Henry Amos decided to start their own club – The East Melbourne Harriers. They linked their new club with the Victorian Amateur Athletic Association and he became the E.M.H. council representative. Entering officialdom, he found himself, in the 3 next decades, acting as steward, judge, starter, timekeeper, referee – whatever post he was required to fill. This led from local to inter-State competitions and he went to Sydney, Brisbane, Auckland and Hobart as manager of Victorian teams taking part in Australasian championships.

On his first interstate trip to Sydney in 1897, he was told of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club which had been in existence for 3 years. He joined immediately and, for the next 40 years, “*I see the vista of forest and mountain and river and lake and seacoast that perhaps I should never have known – certainly I should never have known intimately – but for it*”.

But in these early days, he mixed bushwalking with athletics and the following extract from his autobiography indicates that his athletic career was enthusiastic rather than stellar.

In amateur sport I was never a champion. I boxed a little but never sufficiently well to save myself from the smack that shifted a rib one day – the lump is still fairly visible on my sternum. I played single-stick, but could never be quite sure of guarding that left ear; I worked long and steadily in a gymnasium, but for display purposes I never got beyond the running evolutions and leaping over the horse. I ran with a harrier pack for years, but would be given pertly well the limit in a distance handicap; I trained earnestly for that hardest of all contests, the walking race (yes, I mean it – it is one of the most trying of all physical competitions) but a walker like A. O. Barrett could stand me up at least a mile in ten miles – in other words I was no champion at any of these sports. But from each and all of them, I gained what was better than any rewards like cups or medals – I gained health and strength.

Incidentally and best of all, I gained friends – sound friends whose company has made life the pleasurable thing it has mostly been. If I were permitted to dictate my own epitaph, it would go something like this:

*Here rests the restless R.H.C.,
Here his last journey ends –
Happy with all his world was he,
But happiest with his friends. ²*

Elsewhere, he wrote

A few years ago an epidemic of walking-races raged like a disease, and everyone took off his coat and did ridiculous things in fast time on suburban roads ... So distinctive, indeed, is the action of the expert who can do his mile in seven minutes or less that the cognoscenti, feeling it was neither natural walking nor yet running, coined a special name for it. They called it "gaiting". Some interest attaches to the fact that Australia was the first country in the world to supply a reasonably satisfactory definition of walking and make laws for its control as a sport. ³

In fact, it was Croll and A. O. Barrett who submitted these governing rules to the Australasian Convention of all the amateur associations in Auckland in 1900. The following rules were adopted at that time

1. *That a racing walker must have contact with the ground with one foot during a stride, and with both feet at the end of a stride.*

2. *That the heel of the front foot must touch the ground before the back foot leaves it.*
3. *That as the heel of the front foot touches the ground the leg must not be bent, its knee must be locked.*
4. *That the body and head must be kept upright.* ⁴

These rules stayed in effect in Australia for the next 55 years and the current racewalking rules have changed little in essence from this initial interpretation.

It was no real surprise when he was invited to become the first President of the Victorian Amateur Walking Club in 1923. At that stage, he was 54 years old, had been a leading athletics official in Victoria for 29 years and had been one of the officials of its precursor, the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club for 25 years.

But his first love remained the bush. His time as president of V.A.W.C lasted 3 years. Once the club was established and could stand on its own two feet, he handed on the presidency to William Dickenson and returned to his beloved Walking and Touring Club. In later life, he claimed to have carried his swag for about 3000 miles (4800 km) and to have tramped at least as far on short trips. On top of that, he was an office-bearer of the Melbourne Walking Club for an amazing fifty years.



Bob Croll the bushwalker, circa 1913

His activities were not restricted to the sporting and bushwalking fronts. Encouraged to write by David Blair, Croll began contributing in the early 1890s to *Bohemia*, then to the *Sydney Bulletin*, the *Melbourne Argus* and *Herald* and many other journals; at one stage he was writing three columns each week. For some years he was associate editor of the *Emu*.

In weekly columns, he gave a readable mixture of track information, local history and aesthetic appreciation of the environment. A collection of these was published under the title *The Open Road in Victoria* in 1928. Its success was immediate, its influence considerable and it ran to a second printing within two months. He was encouraged to write a companion volume of anecdotes entitled *Along the track* in 1930. With these writings, he possibly did more than anyone else in his time to encourage bushwalking.

He developed his talent for light verse and the composition of epigraphs, and helped his close friend Percival Serle compile his *Australasian Anthology* in 1927. He also produced editions of the works of the poets John Shaw Neilson and F. S. Williamson in 1934 and in 1940 and, after his retirement, plunged into even more prolific literary activity. He was generous in advising young writers, especially through the Bread and Cheese Club.

He was equally prominent in art circles. In 1920 he produced an edition of etchings by John Shirlow ⁵, in 1935 he was the author of an important biography of Tom Roberts ⁶ and in 1946 he edited Streeton's letters to Roberts. He also organized the State Centenary Art Exhibition, was general secretary of the Australian Academy of Art and a councillor of the Victorian Artists' Society, and opened many exhibitions of paintings. He also wrote the foreword to the definitive book of prints *The Art of Albert Namatjira* which made Albert Namatjira a household name to the Australian public. ⁷

In 1929, with the psychologist S. D. Porteus, Croll made the first of his six trips to Central Australia; he vigorously covered the outback on camel, was granted 'honorary membership' of the Arunta tribe and gradually developed his passionate feelings for the place and its people. He subsequently published his impressions in *Wide Horizons: Wanderings in Central Australia* (1937) about a new polyglot indigenous outback Australia. In aboriginalising his nationalism, Croll caught the emerging mood of the nation and wrote movingly about the

pitiful treatment of Aborigines, and the need to make amends. He also, with Charles Barrett, published in 1943 *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*.



R. H. Croll, the literary figure

His love of the inland is captured in these few words from the forward of *Wide Horizons*

*Stand on one of those seemingly boundless gibber plains,
the horizon of the whole circle as unbroken
as if you were far out on the ocean,
stand there if you wish to know your own proportion in
the scale of the visible world.* ⁸

During World War II Croll was acting chief censor for Victoria for five months in 1941 and relieving talks officer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Victoria the next year. But even during this time of turmoil, his thoughts still turned to his beloved Australian bush and inland. By the 1940s, soil erosion had become a major public concern Australia-wide and Croll was at one of those drawing attention to the issue. In his introduction to Pick's (1942) book on soil erosion, he wrote

"War has come to Australia. The danger is real indeed but, I say it deliberately, not more real than the insidious threat by an enemy we have had with us for years. We can, and will, repel the foe now hammering our frontiers - we are eager and willing to enter the lists against him ; but we are actually encouraging and assisting this other enemy, civilization's greatest menace, soil erosion." ⁹

Geoffrey Serle has commented that Croll was "a classical product of the Victorian goldfields. He nowhere ran very deep, perhaps, yet few in his time made a more diverse contribution to cultural and intellectual life." He was president at various times of the Field Naturalists' Club, the Anthropological Society, and the Travel League of Victoria, and the Wallaby, P.E.N. and Book-plate clubs among others.

He was the most gregarious of men, an habitue of the Amateur Sports Club of Victoria and the Savage Club, with hundreds of friends. He had a 'facetious graceful manner' of unfailing pleasantness; many of his anecdotes are gathered in his reminiscences, *I recall; collections and recollections* (1939) ¹⁰ . In 1946 he published *An autobiography*.

He died at Camberwell on 18 October 1947, survived by his wife Grace Devereaux, nee Croall, whom he had married at Hawthorn Presbyterian Church on 23 September 1914 and by their son; he was cremated. Several portraits of him were painted and he is commemorated by a bronze plaque in the Stawell Town Hall.

¹ The following biography of R. H. Croll draws largely from his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol 8*, P154-155 (M.U.P. 1981) which was contributed by historian Geoffrey Serle.

² *I Recall: Collections and Recollections* by R. H. Croll (Robertson & Mullens Ltd, Melbourne, 1946), p75-76

³ From the preface to R.H. Croll's guide for bushwalkers *The Open Road in Victoria* (Robertson & Mullens Ltd, 1928)

⁴ *Racing Walking Practical Hints* by A. O. Barrett (Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1947)

⁵ *The Etched Work of John Shirlow* by R. H. Croll, 1920

⁶ *Tom Roberts: Father of Australian Landscape Painting* by R. H. Croll, (Sydney: Robertson and Mullens, 1935)

⁷ *The Art of Albert Namatjira* [Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club]

⁸ From the Forward to *Wide Horizons - Wanderings in Central Australia* by R. H. Croll (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1937)

⁹ *Australia's Dying Heart - soil erosion in the inland* by J. H. Pick, 1942: (Melbourne University Press in association with Oxford University Press, Melbourne and London)

¹⁰ *I Recall: Collections and Recollections* by R. H. Croll, (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullins Ltd, 1939)