

MARY MACKILLOP

Sainted Love

IT'S NOT EASY to become a saint in the Catholic Church. For a start you have to be dead, which is never a fun part of a job application process. Secondly, before you were dead you had to have been possessed of 'heroic virtue', a phrase meaning, 'so good it just makes you sick'. Finally, you have to be proven to have performed at least two miracles, or to put it another way, some slightly strange old men have to decide that you performed at least two miracles.

Given all those hoops one has to jump through to get that coveted 'Saint' in front of your name, anyone who gets there is clearly an impressive person. Not even Caroline Chisholm is a saint yet, and she was so good that if she were alive today someone on Twitter would call her problematic. So it can safely be said that St Mary of the Cross MacKillop is one of Australia's highest achievers: indeed she may be the highest achiever of all, given that almost every other notable Australian ceased their achievements upon death. In future St Mary might be joined in the Australian Saints Club by other great Aussies: perhaps Chisholm, or the great humanitarian Father Bob Maguire, or Hugh Jackman. But at the time of writing, MacKillop is all we have, saint-wise, and that's a pretty big feather in one's habit.

Mary Helen MacKillop was born on 15 January 1842, in Newtown, New South Wales – not to be confused with Newtown, New South Wales. The area MacKillop was born in is now Fitzroy in Melbourne, but as at that time neither Victoria nor yarn-bombing had been invented, they decided it would be best to confuse everyone by calling it Newtown while they waited for the hipsters to arrive. Mary was the daughter of Alexander and Flora MacKillop, Scottish immigrants who had travelled around the world in search of similar weather. Alexander had trained for the priesthood, but quit just before being ordained after hearing a rumour that sex was fantastic – a rumour that fortunately never reached his daughter’s ears. Mary, the eldest of eight children⁴⁰, was christened Maria Ellen, but continued to be known as Mary Helen because nobody in the MacKillop family understood how names work.

Alexander MacKillop was not a success as a farmer, possibly because he’d been expecting to be a priest until he was 29 and never learnt how to plant seeds⁴¹, or possibly because Fitzroy was a terrible place to have a farm due to all the second-hand bookshops getting in the way. Due to his failings, the MacKillop family frequently needed to rely on income earned by the children to survive, which can’t exactly have been a boost to Alex’s self-esteem. At 14, Mary got a job in a stationery store. ‘Better than a store that keeps moving around,’ joked her dad. ‘Get a job, you deadbeat,’ Mary retorted, in no mood.

At 18 Mary, still striving to meet the needs of her poverty-stricken and parentally deficient family, found employment as a governess at her aunt and uncle’s estate in Penola, South Australia. This means Mary started out as a governess before becoming a nun,

40 Catholics, eh. What can you do?

41 Except in Jesus’s parable about the seeds, which is extremely sketchy on agricultural detail.

in a rare example of the reverse Von Trapp. Here Mary displayed an early flair for philanthropy, allowing other children of farm workers on the estate to attend lessons with her aunt and uncle's brood.

In 1864, after moving to Victoria, she opened her own school, the Bay View House Seminary for Young Ladies. After founding the school, Mary was joined by the rest of the MacKillops, who were taking their mastery of the art of sponging to a whole new level.

In 1866, Mary received a plea from Father Julian Woods, an English priest and friend of hers from Penola, who asked her to come back to the SA town to open a Catholic school. Mary, always a sucker for a handsome man in a dress, duly returned with her sisters Annie and Lexie: anything to cut down on their parents' food bill. Woods and MacKillop founded their school in a stable, having badly misinterpreted a passage of the New Testament. They got the MacKillop girls' brother to renovate the stable, because the Catholic church, then as now, was terribly short of funds.

On 21 November 1866, the feast day of the Presentation of Mary⁴², several other women joined the MacKillops in Penola, and Mary adopted the name 'Sister Mary of the Cross', which everyone thought seemed a bit pretentious but didn't like to say anything⁴³. Mary and Lexie MacKillop began wearing habits, and the group, calling itself the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart⁴⁴, moved to new digs in Grote Street, in Adelaide's growing Nun District.

At Grote Street the sisters founded a new school, something that was beginning to be something of an obsession with Mary: her

42 Commemorating the time the Virgin Mary presented her plan for a restructure of the sales and marketing departments to the board.

43 I feel like it shouldn't be this easy to just become a nun. Isn't there a test you have to do or something?

44 Not to be confused with the Sisters of St Joseph of the Profane Kidney, a far louder and less demure order.

friends worried that school-founding was getting to be her whole life. ‘Don’t you think you should cut down on all these schools you’re founding, Mary?’ they’d ask. ‘I’m sorry,’ Mary replied, ‘but I can’t stop. I guess it’s ... getting to be a habit with me!’ And then everyone would share a hearty laugh and forget what they were talking about.

The new school was the first religious institute to be founded by an Australian, and would’ve made Mary pretty cocky if that weren’t such a bad look for a nun. MacKillop came up with the ‘Rule of Life’ to act as a guiding principle for her new order: it focused on poverty (i.e. how great it was to be poor), no ownership of personal belongings (which came in handy given the poverty bit), dependence on divine providence (i.e. relaxing and letting God get on with stuff), and willingness to go where needed (which technically was nowhere, since everyone was supposed to depend on divine providence, so depending on nuns going places would violate that completely, but nobody was claiming the Rule of Life was internally consistent, just that it was nice). The Rule of Life proved wildly popular, and women began to flock to Adelaide to get a chance to own nothing and work interminably for the benefit of others. Ten new sisters joined the order by the end of 1867, and MacKillop started to realise she really had something here: it was a lot like Beatlemania.

The Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, or Josephites, also became known colloquially as the ‘Brown Joeys’, due to their plain brown habits and tendency to carry each other around in pouches to save wear and tear on boots. The Joeys were dedicated to the education of the poor, in a time when the prevailing view of the ruling classes was that educating the poor was as useful as reading aloud to firewood. In October 1867 yet another school was opened in Yankalilla⁴⁵, South Australia, and by the end of 1869 21 schools

45 Named after the first lewd act to be prosecuted in the area.

were being run by Josephite nuns around the state, which seems a ridiculously rapid expansion and goes to show that when nuns put their mind to something, they are utterly terrifying.

In December 1869, driven by her insatiable lust for philanthropy, MacKillop went to Brisbane to establish the Queensland branch of the Joeys, basing it at Kangaroo Point⁴⁶. By 1871 there were 130 Josephites working in more than 40 institutions in South Australia and Queensland. Australia had not seen such a powerful force for the welfare of the poor and marginalised since the New South Wales Corps offered a 2-for-1 deal on rum.

Obviously, you can't be a hard-working, selfless woman committing your life to the care and education of the less fortunate without making many powerful enemies, because the world is a gigantic pile of burning garbage. Local South Australian clergymen clashed with Mary's friend Father Woods, now director-general of Catholic education, over education policy, and began a campaign to discredit MacKillop's order – one priest declared that he would ruin Woods through the Sisterhood, just one of countless historical examples that have given Catholic priests their famous reputation for kindness and humility*.

Rumours began to circulate of financial mismanagement – which is a bit tasteless given the whole poverty thing – and that Sister Mary herself had a drinking problem. In fact, she drank alcohol on doctor's orders, to gain relief from her dysmenorrhea, a painful condition that had presumably been visited upon her by God to indicate his dislike of poor children.

One of MacKillop's most formidable adversaries was Father Charles Horan OFM⁴⁷, a nasty and vindictive man who, even by the standards of the priesthood, was about average really. Horan had

46 I know: a bit on the nose.

47 Standing for Obnoxious Fucking Maggot.

been a colleague of Father Keating of Kapunda, north of Adelaide. In 1870 MacKillop heard that Keating had been sexually abusing children. One has to remember that this was a different time, when positions of trust and authority could be given to cruel and predatory men who were allowed to take advantage of their position to violate children. We can all be thankful we live in different times now*.

The Josephites informed Father Woods of the allegations against Keating, and Woods relayed the story to the vicar-general, Father John Smyth, who sent Keating back to Ireland under the church's traditional 'if it's happening somewhere else, it's not happening any more' rule. Keating's dismissal so enraged Horan that when he became acting vicar-general after Smyth's death, he looked to poison the mind of Laurence Bonaventura Sheil, Bishop of Adelaide, against MacKillop and her Joeys.

In September 1871 Horan convinced Sheil that the Josephites' constitution should be changed in such a way as to render the sisters homeless. MacKillop refused to obey this order, on the grounds that it was transparently dumb, and as a result, Sheil excommunicated her for insubordination. This meant she was forbidden contact with the Catholic church, but nevertheless many people considered it a punishment. It was an upsetting time for MacKillop and the Josephites. Most of the order's schools were closed, but there were some Josephites who chose to stay under the jurisdiction of the Adelaide diocese, and were dubbed 'Black Joeys' for their split with the founder of the order, and their disturbing scavenging activities during bushfires. The Black Joeys maintain a presence to this day, under the title of the Federation Sisters of St Joseph, and must have some guts to go around boasting about how their group was founded by throwing a saint under the bus.

Mary's excommunication didn't last long: on his deathbed, Bishop Sheil pondered the advisability of coming face-to-face with

God with his file still marked ‘Incredible Douche’, and ordered Horan to lift the excommunication.

Back in the fold and as hot for good deeds as ever, Mary set her sights on even loftier peaks. In 1873, she travelled to Rome to seek the approval of Pope Pius IX – commonly considered one of the all-time best Piuses⁴⁸ – for the Sisters of St Joseph, which would make them an official, papally sanctioned religious congregation and not just a bunch of weird ladies in brown poking their noses into everyone’s business⁴⁹. The Pope’s approval was forthcoming, but not before the Vatican altered the Rule of Life in regard to the vow of poverty. This angered Father Woods, who hated to see women owning things, and a rift developed between he and Mary.

Returning to Australia in 1875, Mary continued to face opposition from priests and bishops over her order, which flouted convention by living in the community rather than in convents, and being under the control of a superior general chosen from within the congregation rather than the diocesan bishop, which in the world of 1870s Catholicism basically made them hippies. The Josephites further enraged the conservative/dickish religious hierarchy of the day with their approach to education: they refused to accept government funding, which angered those who didn’t like looking a gift horse in the mouth; they refused to teach instrumental music, which angered those who thought that was kind of a weird thing to refuse to do but to be fair were themselves a bit weird in thinking that instrumental music was so freaking important; and they refused to teach girls from wealthy families, which angered those who adhered to Jesus’s

48 But then, most fans will tell you that the odd-numbered Piuses are always the best.

49 That role in Australian life having since been taken over by the CWA.

famous admonition, ‘Be nice to rich people, they’re the best people in the world’.

Their idiosyncratic eagerness to piss off the authorities saw the Josephites expelled by intolerant bishops from Bathurst in 1876 and Queensland in 1880. But the order continued to expand throughout South Australia and New South Wales. MacKillop established the Josephites in Victoria and New Zealand, despite being replaced as Superior General by Sister Bernard Walsh in 1883, a controversial move among many who considered it deeply suspicious that a nun was called ‘Bernard’. In 1899, Mary became superior general once more after Bernard’s death, yet again proving her peerless ability to grind her opponents down.

In May 1901, Mary suffered a stroke at Rotorua, New Zealand, and most people who’d been there didn’t blame her. She was an invalid from then until her death on 8 August 1909. The Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran, said, ‘I consider this day to have assisted at the deathbed of a saint’, and it would be charitable to assume that he meant spiritual assistance rather than assisting her to die. Mother Mary MacKillop was buried at Gore Hill cemetery, where pilgrims immediately began removing earth from around the grave, because Christians are a bit strange and they thought it would give them superpowers or something. The ongoing soil theft resulted in Mary being exhumed in 1914 and moved to a vault before the altar of the Virgin⁵⁰ Mary in the memorial chapel in Mount Street, North Sydney. Here nobody could move earth from around her, which was far more respectful, but caused a massive rise in whatever it was the Christians were hoping the earth would stop.

In a way, what Mary MacKillop did after her death was the most important part of her story, although in another way, this is not even

⁵⁰ Alleged.

remotely true. However, it was her post-mortem shenanigans that got her sainted. The process to have her declared a saint began in 1925, initiated by the then-Mother Superior of the Brown Joeys, Mother Laurence. Archbishop Michael Kelly of Sydney established a tribunal to continue the process, and as quickly as possible, nothing happened. Decades went by while church elders fuffed around examining Mary's writings, discussing her life's work, and generally debating the provocative proposition: 'Mary MacKillop: quite nice?'

In 1973 the initial phase of investigations was completed, demonstrating the ultimate source of the Catholic belief in an afterlife: if they didn't live after death they'd never see anything get done. Further investigations resulted in MacKillop's 'heroic virtue' being declared in 1992. So only 83 years from death to official recognition that she was great: bravo, speedy apparatus of church officialdom.

But obviously heroic virtue is not enough to become a saint: the real crux of sainthood is the performing of miracles, i.e. curing terminal diseases after people have prayed to you. Before Mary could become Saint Mary, she had to prove to the church's satisfaction that she was a qualified ghost doctor, and this can be a tricky thing to prove, what with being invisible and incorporeal, and proof of such a thing being by any measure utterly impossible. Plus, to be a saint you have to do it *twice*. But Mary MacKillop was no quitter: she was determined to provide undead first aid, and she would not rest until she had. Which is a bit sad really: you'd think she deserved a bit of rest after dying.

The same year she was declared heroically virtuous, the church announced that it had been persuaded that in 1961, Veronica Hopson was cured of leukaemia by praying for Mary MacKillop's intercession. Intercession is a useful process whereby if you want

something, but find that when you pray directly to God the line is busy, you can instead pray to some dead person who you know is very nice, and they'll go let God know what you want. God is, after all, a busy man, and cannot be expected to answer every call personally – but His operators are standing by and He promises your prayer is important to Him. And if the person you pray to is actually able to tap God on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, mind zapping that leukaemia away, chief?' and God then does just that, then you know the person is actually a saint, because it's not like he's reading Post-It notes from every upstart little ghost who tries to get a tumour shrunk.

As a result of MacKillop's efforts in paranormal triage in the Hopson case, Pope John Paul II⁵¹ beatified her on 19 January 1995 – beatification being one of the many processes devised by the Catholic church to make everything as pointlessly convoluted as possible. It recognises a formerly alive person's entry into Heaven and ability to, as noted above, get through to God's personal number. Being beatified, Mary was now entitled to call herself 'Blessed Mary MacKillop', which may or may not have seemed like a big whoop for a dead woman who'd had to wait 86 years for it.

It was on 19 December 2009 – just over a hundred years since Mary first moved into Jesus's gated community – that the Congregation for the Causes of Saints issued a papal decree recognising a second miracle. Kathleen Evans had recovered from inoperable lung and brain cancer in the 1990s after praying to Mary, and the Vatican had decided that these two events were causally linked because, you know, why the hell not.

Now that two miracles had been ascribed to MacKillop, there was simply no way to deny that she was a ghost doctor of the highest calibre. Her canonisation was announced on 19 February

51 A rare case of a sequel that lived up to the original.

2010, and officially took place on 17 October that year. Finally, Mary MacKillop was a saint, and nobody could take that away from her, no matter how many paedophile-shielders she upset. Eight thousand Australians were in Vatican City to witness the canonisation⁵², a 900 per cent increase in the Vatican's population and an equivalent decrease in the Vatican's standard of grooming. Whether, after becoming a saint, MacKillop has continued to tug God's sleeve and make him fix sick people, or simply sat back, KPI achieved, resting on her laurels, is unknown.

It's hard to overstate the impact Mary MacKillop had on the world, and on Australia in particular.⁵³ Simply the fact that she was the first Australian saint is huge: our country has had multiple gold medallists, award-winning artists, Nobel Prize winners and serial killers, but only one saint; she stands alone on that particular pedestal. But more than that: in a time when life in Australia was cruel and difficult for most, she brought compassion and generosity to the unforgiving frontier. She defied convention and the authority of the church itself to bring Jesus's message of charity and love to the poorest of her country. There were many who sought to bring her down, but she never gave way to bitterness or rancour: she simply carried on doing what she believed to be right, driven by devotion to her God and love for her fellow humans. Like Caroline Chisholm before her, she reached out across the land to lend a hand to those most in need. The poor, the sick and the infirm were her business, and she never stopped ministering to them. In so doing, she showed

52 A term for making someone a saint, dating back to the Middle Ages, when an announcement of sainthood was marked by firing the saint out of a cannon.

53 Well, not that hard. I mean you could say, 'Mary MacKillop discovered fire' or 'Mary MacKillop raised Africa from the sea', and you'd have overstated it pretty easily. But you know what I mean.

that Australia was not just a country of convicts, fortune-hunters, and being kicked to death by kangaroos: it was a land of faith, hope, and love. Was not this her real miracle? No – curing brain cancer is much more impressive. But still.

FUN FOR YOU AT HOME: Find a friend or relative suffering from a terminal disease, and pray to a saint to cure them. Did they get better? You probably didn't pray hard enough. For shame.

PHAR LAP

A Horse That Ran Fast

THERE ARE MANY kinds of heroes. Heroes who wear capes, heroes who wear tights, heroes who wear metal suits, heroes who wear cleavage-enhancing catsuits: the list goes on. But sometimes a hero comes along who isn't quite like other heroes. A hero who does not fight crime, or save lives, or actually help anyone in any way whatsoever, but rather, a hero who inspires people to be their best selves through great deeds and spectacular example. A hero for the masses, a hero who gives hope to the hopeless, joy to the joyless, and an intangible temporary sense of illusory wellbeing to the people who don't have one of those. Every now and then, a hero comes along who you can bet on – not in a figurative sense, but literally. What I'm saying is, sometimes a hero is, in a nutshell, a horse.

Australia has had many hero horses over the years, from Black Cavalier to Mugabe Diva, but every great horse who emerges in this country lives in the shadow of the greatest of them all: Phar Lap.

Phar Lap. Big Red. The Wonder Horse. Red Terror. Bobby. Ol' Horsey Legs. The Fast Runner. Galloping Sam. Lord Saddled-Up. Racewinner Von Jockeychair. He went by many names. But call him what you like, the one thing you couldn't call him was slow. Because that would be a lie. He was quick.

How quick was he? Well, put it this way: if you and Phar Lap were to go head-to-head in a 100-metre race, the International Association of Athletics Federations would declare the race un-sanctioned, and neither of your times would count. But rest assured that although the IAAF would refuse to allow the result to stand, Phar Lap would definitely beat you. It wouldn't even be close – you're not really in great shape anyway, are you? Be honest.

In today's world, when we revere fast horses far too much, it's hard to imagine how Australians of the 1930s revered Phar Lap slightly more than that. To understand the effect of this magnificent beast on the national psyche, it is necessary to first understand the Great Depression, a terrible time when everybody was unemployed but still had to wear hats in public to avoid being called a communist. The stock market had crashed on 29 October 1929, on what became known as 'Black Tuesday' due to systemic racism.

Australia, which even back then had a strict federal policy of doing whatever America did, threw itself into the Depression with gusto. Unemployment lines grew to giant-snake-from-the-end-of-*Aladdin* proportions. Men left their families to travel the land seeking any work they could find. Everywhere you looked, there was another poor soul with a piece of cardboard hanging around his neck, reading, 'Wanted: A decent job' or 'Will work for food' or 'Please give: spent all my money on cardboard'.

To sum up, the Great Depression was, no fooling, bloody depressing. Not just in hindsight – people remarked at the time on how big a downer it was. There are few things more disheartening than becoming the subject of award-winning black-and-white photography, and this was the fate of many during the Depression. What the people needed was something to cheer them up. I mean, what they really needed was money, but failing that, something to

cheer them up would be nice too. Australians were crying out for a spirit-lifter. ‘Please God,’ they pleaded, ‘send us a horse, that we might smile again!’

Their salvation was already at hand: on 4 October 1926¹²⁴, in the little town of Seadown on New Zealand’s South Island, a foal was born to Entreaty, a black mare who had had one race, for no place – typical of the sexism of the time. The foal’s father was Night Raid, a leading sire named after the movie *Meatballs*, who was very much in-demand as a sire at the time. Since retiring to stud in 1924, Night Raid’s sperm had taken New Zealand by storm, and was named Gamete of the Year three years running at the annual Kiwi Gonad Awards.

The fact that Phar Lap was born in New Zealand has caused some to question whether he was a true ‘Australian’ hero. However, Australia has a proud history of producing talented New Zealanders: Russell Crowe, the Finn brothers, Derryn Hinch, Marcia Hines, Manu Feildel – these are just a few of the stars who have ‘come across the Dutch’ to find that while New Zealand is a decent enough place to be born in, you have to come to Australia to really live.

Phar Lap’s migration to the big brother of the Antipodes occurred earlier than most other celebrities: he was only one at the time, younger even than Jay Laga’aia when he came. He was purchased by the American businessman David J. Davis, who had channelled all his resentment at his parents’ choice of his name into becoming wealthy enough to buy horses. He made his money in photography and dinnerware imports and was known popularly as ‘The Flashbulb and Gravy Boat King’. Or at least, would’ve been known popularly if photography and dinnerware were popular things to do.

124 The very day, ironically enough, that former general Rodolfo Gallegos led an uprising in southern Guanajuato. Funny coincidence.

Davis was taking the advice of his trainer, Harry Telford¹²⁵, but regretted it when young Phar Lap arrived in Australia. The colt hardly looked like a future champion: he was gangly, awkward, and had a face covered with warts. But then, so was Audrey Hepburn when she started out, and look how well she did. Phar Lap would prove to be the Hepburn of his day, although only after Telford placated the outraged Davis by offering to train him for free, the trainer not wanting to lose one of his few remaining owners through what racing industry insiders had taken to calling ‘Harry’s balls-ups’.

The name ‘Phar Lap’ was given to the horse by Telford, from an idea by medical student Aubrey Ping, Telford apparently being the kind of horse trainer who hung around universities waiting for students to name horses for him. Ping suggested ‘farlap’, a word which in the Zhuang and Thai languages means ‘lightning’. Telford liked the idea, but changed the initial ‘F’ to a ‘Ph’ because Melbourne Cup winners had frequently had seven-letter names and he was also the kind of horse trainer who thought that would make a difference: which was why he didn’t have many remaining owners.

Telford also gelded Phar Lap, believing this would help the horse focus fully on racing and also because he just liked doing that to animals. He was a weird guy, Harry Telford, but one hell of a trainer. Or rather, he probably wasn’t that great a trainer really – he hadn’t won much before he met Phar Lap, and his subsequent success may have had more to do with having a particularly good horse in his stable rather than any innate ability on his part to transform ordinary horses into champions. Though let’s be fair: that’s basically the case for every trainer ever, and maybe trainers should stop acting so superior all the time just because they remembered to feed the horse and buy a stopwatch.

125 The trainer he employed, I mean – Telford wasn’t training *him*.

Still, at some point after Harry cut Phar Lap's balls off, the facial warts cleared right up, so maybe there was something there.

The newly eunuchised Phar Lap finished last in his first race, which must have made his owner want to shoot him in the head right there and then – I know I would have. Luckily, David Davis restrained his bloodlust long enough to see his gangly, awkward, wart-faced freak not come last in his next three races. Consulting his 'How to Own Horses' guide, he found that not coming last was an improvement on coming last, and was filled with renewed hope. This was rewarded on 27 April 1929, when Phar Lap stormed home to win the Maiden Juvenile Handicap¹²⁶ at Rosehill. As it was a maiden race, he was competing only with other horses who had never won a race, but every champion has to start somewhere, and Phar Lap's new status as Fastest Loser was indeed a start.

Having broken through for a win, the eccentric genius Telford immediately stopped Phar Lap from racing. Several months went by before he returned to competition, and began making a name for himself¹²⁷. A second place at Randwick in September put him on the racing world's radar, and the public felt a sudden upsurge of wellbeing. 'There's always the risk of a major global financial disaster next month,' they told each other, 'but that horse coming second makes the prospect seem a lot less frightening.' He followed that second with wins in the Rosehill Guineas, the AJC Derby, and the AJC Derby Plate, and pundits could deny the facts no longer: Phar Lap was a horse that could run fast, and he had hardly any warts any more. A shiver went down the spines of the other horses in the Australian racing scene: this was because they were terrified of the tiny men who kept hitting them, but if they'd had any idea

126 These were ableist times.

127 'Phar Lap'.

what was going on in their lives, that shiver might well have been fear of Phar Lap's looming dominance.

A few days after Black Tuesday, Phar Lap won the VRC Derby, feeding off the misery of the nation as if he were running an equine hedge fund that had shorted several failed stocks. Immediately, the poverty-stricken populace smiled in relief and murmured, 'It's going to be all right' to each other. Three days later, he came third in the Melbourne Cup, aka the 'race that stops a nation'¹²⁸, serving notice that this was one young horse that was going places fast, and in circles.

Phar Lap was going from strength to strength, and occasionally even to strength again: from March to May 1930, he won nine races in a row, and people were starting to think that the Great Depression wasn't so bad, really. Especially with Don Bradman hitting hundreds and Walter Lindrum scoring thousands and Hubert Opperman riding a bike and all. The correlation between economic misery and Australian sporting success was so great that the government was forced to give serious thought to maintaining a state of permanent Depression, just to keep the country's self-esteem up.

Phar Lap, of course, was completely ignorant of such matters. In fact, he was completely ignorant of most matters, being – and this bears repeating – a horse. His attention was focused on one thing, and one thing only: running fast enough to make the man stop hurting him. Another sensational winning streak in the 1930–31 season included the prestigious Cox Plate, and he was now hot favourite for the Melbourne Cup.

There were still obstacles to overcome, however, and by 'obstacles' I mean 'bullets'. So profound had been the mighty chestnut's impact on the country that a gang of criminals tried to shoot him on 1 November 1930. What was the reason for

¹²⁸ I.e. white people.

the attempted assassination? Perhaps Phar Lap threatened their investments in his rivals. Perhaps it was purely a personal matter: Phar Lap may have insulted one of their wives. Or maybe it was the racecourse vet, having double-booked himself on race day, attempting pre-emptive euthanasia so as to avoid any embarrassment.

In any case, the incident didn't worry Phar Lap much, because he was a horse and he didn't know the shots were aimed at him: for all he knew it was just normal weekend gunplay. He won the Melbourne Stakes later that day, and three days later lined up in the Melbourne Cup, a testament to his resilience, and the lack of follow-through common to the criminal gangs of the day. The Underbelly guys wouldn't have given up so easily.

The 1930 Melbourne Cup was a day of destiny for Phar Lap, whose entire four years of life had been – unbeknownst to him because he was a horse – leading up to this. The *Sydney Morning Herald* said that the horse 'had become nothing short of an obsession in the public mind', and that public mind was bent on Flemington Racecourse, where the object of this quite unhealthy obsession was ready to take the final step into immortality. On his back he carried 63kg, most of which was a young jockey named Jim Pike, who had himself sacrificed much – food, for example – in his quest to sit on the nation's greatest horse. Sixty-three kilos isn't heavy for a grown man, but it's a hell of a lot for a horse to carry on its back, especially when the horse has skinny legs. According to the *Herald*: 'The question was not which horse would win, but "Can Phar Lap carry the weight? Can he do what no other horse before him has done?"' Which seems a very similar question to 'Which horse will win?' if you ask me, but I am no turf expert.

Whatever question you cared to ask, Phar Lap answered it with head held high. He smashed his opposition, carrying those 63kg as lightly as if they had been 61.5kg. He had been the shortest-priced

favourite in history at 8/11, and was the only favourite to win at odds-on, thus defying the odds by performing exactly as the odds had predicted.

It's difficult today, when people have very few economic concerns and sport is never used as a distraction from more important matters, to picture the amazing scenes when Phar Lap bolted home in the Cup. If 'the race that stops a nation' had been mostly marketing spin previously, it certainly wasn't now: everyone stopped. Strong men wept with joy. Strong women laughed at the strong men. Weak people of both sexes smashed windows and set fire to each other out of sheer exuberance. Delighted punters rejoiced in their extremely meagre winnings due to the winner's incredibly unsporting odds. If the Melbourne Cup wasn't already a public holiday, and if public holidays weren't meaningless anyway because nobody had a job, it would've been as if everyone took a holiday to celebrate Phar Lap's victory.

The 1930 Melbourne Cup was part of a 14-race winning streak for Phar Lap. In all he won 37 times from 51 starts: and from 1 March 1930, when he won the VRC St Leger Stakes, to his final race on 20 March 1932, he won 32 of 35, which seems pretty decent. Freakish, even: and more amazing when you consider that in every one of those races, he was competing against other horses, which are pretty fast.

Australia was now simply too small for a talent as gigantic as Phar Lap: it was time to take Big Red international. Davis shipped Phar Lap, and stable foreman Tommy Woodcock, to North America, and with them went the dreams of a nation, who lined up at the soup kitchens with that hope burning in their breasts that every Australian feels every day of their lives: the hope that some other Australian will validate their existence by achieving something significant overseas.

First stop for Phar Lap was Mexico, where he was entered in the Agua Caliente Handicap, the richest race in North American racing, which seems a bit odd, don't you think? I mean, Mexico? Twenty years before this they were all fighting the Wild Bunch, and now they were offering big money to horses, more than Kentucky or Massachusetts or Delaware or any of those people? Mexico is full of surprises¹²⁹.

Anyway, Phar Lap won the Agua Caliente Handicap, obviously. As an Australian¹³⁰, he was always going to be no match for the feeble American horses, raised on hot dogs and prone to hyper-obesity. It sent a message to the whole North American racing establishment: the only thing standing in the way of Phar Lap's total world domination was the possibility of sudden, mysterious death. In retrospect, this message was dangerously specific.

Phar Lap's first North American win would turn out to be his last. The world's most famous five-year-old¹³¹ fell ill on 5 April 1932, at a stable in California, and haemorrhaged to death that day, which is a pretty awful way to go, even for a horse. Immediately a suspicion arose that Phar Lap had been poisoned, based on the suddenness of the death and the fact that that was exactly the kind of thing Americans would do. An autopsy revealed inflamed stomach and intestines, a conclusion refined by specialists examining the results in 2000, by which time you'd think everyone was over it, but there you go. These specialists opined that Phar Lap died of duodenitis-proximal jejunitis, a severe inflammation of the duodenum and upper jejunum, which are I believe things that horses have in their tummies.

The studies did not end there, however: in 2006 scientists at the Australian Synchrotron, who one assumes had no more pressing

129 Few of them as fun as this one.

130 Sort of.

131 A title now held by former Liberal MP Wyatt Roy.

tasks to attend to, declared that Phar Lap was almost certainly poisoned with a huge dose of arsenic. However, Sydney vet Percy Sykes – if for some reason you’re interested in his opinion – believes the horse was not poisoned, noting that arsenic was a common ingredient in tonics of the time, for both horses and humans, which if nothing else proves how stupid people in the past were.

As it was apparently common practice among the idiots of the day to feed champion racehorses regular drinks of arsenic to keep them fit and healthy, it’s hard to determine just how the poison got into Phar Lap’s system. A further analysis of his mane in 2007 revealed that he had ingested a massive dose of arsenic in the couple of days prior to his death. Whether it was put there by nefarious intent, or by someone who thought he looked peaky and decided to pep him up with some nice fresh arsenic, it’s impossible to say. Tommy Woodcock said Phar Lap was never given any arsenic-based tonic, but the probability of Tommy Woodcock being a hopelessly naïve young idealist is high: Harry Telford definitely gave his horses arsenic from time to time, as any responsible trainer of the 1930s would.

So we can’t know conclusively whether Phar Lap was brutally murdered by ruthless American gangsters scared of what his astonishing feats would do to their revenue from illegal bookmaking, but nevertheless, let’s be honest, that’s definitely what happened. If he wasn’t poisoned by gangsters, this story becomes much less interesting, and who wants that?

His death was tragic, but already in his five short years on earth, Phar Lap had achieved more than most people who aren’t lower animals forced into servitude for the entertainment and enrichment of humans. His legacy was greater than any horse before or since, pretty much all of whom are a big disappointment in comparison. He was an inaugural inductee to the Australian Racing Hall of

Fame and the New Zealand Racing Hall of Fame, and statues of him stand in both Melbourne and his birthplace of Timaru. His likeness graced a postage stamp, along with a caption explaining who it was because otherwise it's just a random horse.

The affection the public had for Phar Lap – who was, to reiterate, a horse – is perhaps best shown by what happened to him after he died: unlike most horses, the people loved Phar Lap so much they split him into several pieces and took them to various places – we can only hope that someday someone loves us enough to dismember us. At the Melbourne Museum, you can see Phar Lap's stuffed body, staring eerily at you with his dead, glassy eyes, a faint air of accusation in his face: 'see what you have done to me,' he seems to say. Meanwhile, visitors to the National Museum of New Zealand in Wellington can see Phar Lap's skeleton, the absence of which might be why the stuffed skin in Melbourne looks so moody. And his heart, that huge heart that weighed almost twice as much as an average horse's, the heart that beat for us all and drove him on to accomplishments hitherto unprecedented for a horse, is to be found at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

Unless it doesn't. The heart in Canberra has been declared a fake by journalist Peter Luck: a TV interview Luck conducted with the daughter of the vet who performed Phar Lap's first post-mortem contained the claim that the heart was destroyed in the autopsy and the museum's organ is of an anonymous draught horse. But museum visitors get to see a really big horse's heart, and who can ask for anything more? Let's hold on to the myth – let's not allow Peter Luck to ruin our happiness any more than he already has.

The provenance of a heart is hardly important anyway, of course: the main thing is that this beautiful, gentle animal continues to capture the public's imagination in ways that border on the disturbing.

Phar Lap came along at a time when Australia needed a lift. Spirits sagging, morale plunging, we were craving a hero, and we got one. In just five years he won the hearts of millions and turned the sport of racing into something more than just a vortex of despair for gambling addicts and a front for organised crime. If the Great Depression placed the country in the grip of the black dog, it was the chestnut horse who proudly kicked that dog to death. And he did it all without ever once having the slightest clue that he was doing it, a much more selfless career than all the so-called 'role models' whose success is tainted by self-awareness. Truly, no hero has ever been purer, or nobler, or more quadrupedal, than the testicularly challenged champion they named 'Lightning'.

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