

## Frederic Lassetter (1828-1911) Plaque unveiling, 26 September 2022

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On the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1908, Frederic Lassetter spoke about the amazing changes that had taken place in Sydney during his lifetime. He looked back almost 60 years to when he became a partner for a modest sized ironmongery retailer, *Iredale & Co*, at just 22 years of age in 1850. As he looked over the harbour from his home in *Redleaf* he recalled that most of the goods sold at *Iredale & Co* came from across the seas and almost all of them travelled up the harbour, taking 4-6 months to arrive from the United Kingdom and Europe.

At 22 years of age, Lassetter's youthful determination and competitive streak was clearly in evidence: when a ship filled with stock from overseas was signalled as it approached the Heads, Lassetter sitting in the *Iredale* store in George Street in the city, would jump on his horse, which he had on standby and saddled near the entrance to the store, race down to the quay, hop into a waterman's skiff and met the vessel as it was coming up the harbour. According to Lassetter (in his own words): 'I would board her and ask the captain to let me look at his manifest. Of course, I knew the marks of all the leading firms [of wholesale merchants/importers], so that I was able to go into a merchant and tell him goods were arriving for him in such and such a vessel. He would thank me for the news and I would have no trouble getting the first offer of the consignment.' [*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1908, p7] In other words, he would secure the goods before any of his competitors.

Lassetter was not a wealthy man, but very much self-made – in fact he had little money to show for himself when he became a partner at *Iredales* – he secured money for the partnership from backers confident in his abilities in business including his previous boss.

But to be successful, sometimes have to be in the right place at the right time... though that is not always enough: you also have to know how to react when opportunities arise and Frederic certainly did just that. For it was just a year after Frederic became a partner at *Iredale & Co*, that a gold rush began in Bathurst in 1851. As swarms of locals and immigrants headed to the gold fields, riches came not just to the few who found gold but to those who supplied the gold-diggers with shovels and pans and all the accoutrements necessary to dig for gold and live in the area. Lassetter and his team took horses and carts loaded with goods to Bathurst, established a temporary branch of the store near the Turon diggings, and returned to Sydney with parcels of newly won gold.

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<sup>1</sup> This speech was delivered at *Redleaf*, 536 New South Head Road, Double Bay, 26 September, 2022, at the unveiling of a plaque to commemorate the life of Frederic Lassetter. The plaque is located on the footpath on New South Head Road, between *Redleaf* and the *Woollahara Gallery at Redleaf* (formerly *St Brigid's*).

Prosperity grew quickly. By 1860 at the age of 32, Lassetter had taken over the firm from his partners and set about seriously expanding operations. Three years later he changed the name of the firm to *F Lassetter & Co* and in the same year – 1863 - built one of the largest stores in Sydney up to that time – in George Street near Market Street. The opening of the store was a gala occasion attended by Governor and Lady Young, the Premier, and various members of parliament. The VIPs partook in a light lunch served up by a Mr Compagnoni, drank success to the establishment, and were entertained by a German band stationed in one of the galleries – I am reliably told they would have played waltzes, polkas and other similar tunes – and perhaps a German band is the one thing missing from today's ceremony.

The new building was in the Italian style, fronted by pilasters with carved Corinthian capitals, huge plate glass windows and the Lassetter name in large letters on the building. Inside it was a 'temple' of iron and glass (using the latest building technology of the day) with an imposing staircase, galleries and large skylight. It was one of the sites of Sydney... but Frederic Lassetter was always thinking of ways to expand and he did so by increasing the size of the store several times over the following decades. By the 1890s, the store extended across two wide shop fronts and back from George Street to York, then the next block York to Clarence and the next Clarence to Kent. *Lassetter's* also had a warehouse in Pyrmont and a factory in Surry Hills.

During this period, Lassetter also increased the range of goods sold. The company was originally a retailer of ironmongery... which really meant any metal product – a newspaper report from 1885 [*The Illustrated Sydney News*, 29 August 1885, p11] said that this included: 'Steam engines, agricultural implements of all kinds, and machinery, tools for all mechanical trades, ironmongery fittings of every sort which are used by builders. There are strong room doors for banks, and bells for churches, lighting conductors, sanitary fittings, in fact there does not seem to be any trade or industry in the colony which could not be here supplied with all its hardware requirements.' And there was a move into new product lines – first glassware, dinnerware and other ceramics, then groceries, furniture and finally drapery and clothing. In fact, *Lassetter's* had turned into a department store... though the term 'department store' was unknown at the time and instead *Lassetter's* was commonly known as an emporium or by the much more insightful term, 'universal provider'. And (similar to other large emporia of the time) there was just one large central store with no suburban or regional branches– this trend would only come later after World War 2.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the size and power of the firm together with advances in transport and communication meant that Lassetter no longer had to get into a waterman's skiff to meet merchant vessels coming up the harbour – instead the firm had London buying offices and forged deals directly with large manufacturers especially in Europe and North America (cutting out the middleman) and had goods exclusively made for the company – you can still find some of these in collectables stores, auctions and on ebay (dinnerware, locks, clocks) marked with the name *F Lassetter & Co*. The development of transport

networks with Sydney as the hub, attracted people to the store but also meant that *Lassetter's* could transport goods directly out to customers. Long before online shopping existed, *Lassetter's* became one of the largest mail order retailers in Australia – its monthly catalogue reached 1200 pages in length (brick-like in size) – *Lassetter's* advertised it as 'A world condensed in a book' [*The Worker*, 23 May 1907] – and they sent goods by rail and sea around Australia, and to NZ and the Pacific.

Frederic Lassetter was also an innovator in other ways especially in relation to staff – there were annual bonuses for sales staff, a health benefits program and a profit sharing scheme for the workforce.

Although Frederic Lassetter worked less as he got older, he still had a hand in the business right up until he passed away at Redleaf in 1911. By that time, he had been at the helm of the business for over 60 years and turned *Lassetter's* into one of the largest retailers in Australia with a staff of around 1000 employees - probably only *Anthony Hordern & Sons* was a larger retailer at the time. But ironically, Frederic's success and penchant for providing good education for his children meant that later generations of the family entered other professional fields – in the military, the law, etc. Two of his sons did sit on the board of Directors, with Harry Lassetter becoming chairman after his father died. But soon after Harry passed on in 1926, the company was sold... there would be no third generation of Lassetters in the retail trade and the Lassetter name ceased to exist in the retail world. But it seems appropriate that the Lassetter name is now remembered here at *Redleaf*, the home of Frederic and his family, overlooking the harbour via which goods flowed to Sydney and which was so important in helping Frederic Lassetter build his retail empire. So long as we remember names, so long those people live. [Bernard Cornwell, *The flame bearer*, 2016]

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