



How the Upper Murray Lost the Jubilee Melbourne Cup to an Outsider

From Carbine's Dream

By "P.P." Brunswick

*'Then the rush of silken jackets—
There's Trafalgar-well in hand,
Striding lovely in the centre
As they galloped past the stand'*

Owned by Peter and Walter Edward Mitchell from Bringenbrong, Trafalgar was one of the finest racehorses bred in the Upper Murray. He was the only Upper Murray horse to compete in the Jubilee Melbourne Cup in 1910. Running second to Comedy King an English bred horse owned by bookmaker Solomon Green, Trafalgar was half a neck away from bringing the Cup home.

As 'the silvery-maned grandson' of the famous 1890 Melbourne Cup winner Carbine, Trafalgar, sired by Wallace and out of Grand Canary (owned by James Mitchell from Tabletop) was born on the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

Compared to Carbine who won 33 of his 43 starts during his career, by 1912 Trafalgar had won 23 out of 56 starts. Carbine won £29,476 in total prize money while Trafalgar totalled £20,603. Carbine was the more successful racehorse, although he belonged to an earlier era than Trafalgar. The 1909 Sydney Cup was one of Trafalgar's most important wins, following on from Dyed Garments' (also owned by P and W Mitchell) success in the same race the previous year. (There is a photograph of Dyed Garments in the tearoom at the Towong Racecourse Grandstand.)

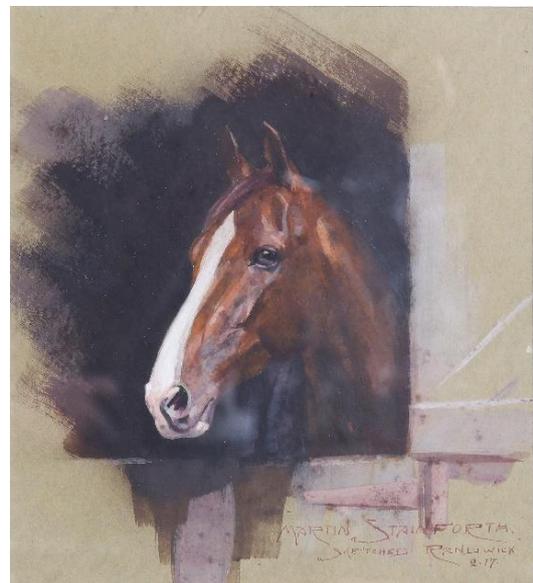


Image 1. Martin Stainforth painting of Trafalgar. Source: Private collection

Suspicion and intrigue

In Australian racing history Phar Lap is not the only successful racehorse to be threatened. The Upper Murray has its own intriguing story. On the Monday evening before the 1910 Melbourne Cup, Trafalgar's trainer Mr Walter Hickenbotham received an anonymous letter card beginning with the words,



'A word of warning to you. Look out they are going to stop the Grand chestnut by any but fair means...' 'He will be crowded in by interfering boys & goats which will spoil the great victory.'

One contemporary newspaper report commented, 'Opinions differ among competent judges in Melbourne over the result of the Cup. The prevailing idea is that "Trafalgar should have won". More partial is Walter Edward's comment in a letter to his wife Winifred Mitchell on the Tuesday evening after the Cup, "There is no doubt that we had a lot of hard luck, the horse being badly bumped, & interfered with at the turn, which really lost us the race.'



Image 2. Postcard of the Melbourne Cup 1910

Almost a year later, on 14 October 1911, in *The Australasian* 'Terlinga' wrote in the column 'Turf Gossip', 'To those well placed for seeing the field come round the final turn in the last Melbourne Cup, it was as plain as a pikestaff that Trafalgar lost that race through being edged out by other horses. It was no fault of Cameron's [the jockey]. Comedy King had all the room he wanted on the rails, while two or three pushed Trafalgar right into the centre of the running, and he must have lost a good deal more ground than he was beaten by. There was no actual interference at the turn, and the "edging out" may not have been done on purpose, but personally I have not the least doubt that Comedy King would never have won if one or two of the riders of the horses near the front at the straight entrance had been more favourably disposed towards Trafalgar.'

On 4 March 1912 in the Essendon Stakes, Trafalgar really showed his metal in a 'fair ding-dong' winning from Comedy King by a length and a quarter. Comedy King's retirement was announced the following day. By the end of November 1913, the horse's owner Solomon Green was charged with keeping a common gaming house.

On 19 October 1912 after winning Sydney's Randwick Plate for the fourth time, trainer Mr Walter Hickenbotham advised P and W Mitchell to retire Trafalgar as the horse showed signs of lameness. If there had been foul play in the 1910 Melbourne Cup and bearing in mind the suspected poisoning of Phar Lap twenty years later in 1932, perhaps it was an inspired decision.

After a break Trafalgar was put to stud at Bringenbrong. A regional newspaper claimed, 'The veteran is idolised in this—his home district. When he was led from his train-box [at Tallangatta] young girls strewed rose leaves in his path.' In May 1914 there were short-lived claims that he was returning to training. By October, his retirement from racing was clear.

Trafalgar's half-brother Patrobas, bred at Bringenbrong and owned by Mrs Edith Widdis in Gippsland won the 1915 Melbourne Cup, thrilling those serving on Gallipoli and the Western Front. Some AIF commanding officers ensured that the results were telegraphed through to Gallipoli! Mrs Widdis was the first woman to own a Melbourne Cup winner and Walter Mitchell lived to regret the sale.

After the dissolution of the P and W Mitchell Partnership, Trafalgar was put up for sale. On 11 March 1916 *The Argus* recorded 'A very large crowd went to the yards of Messrs William C Yuille and Co. at Newmarket to see Trafalgar sold.' 'Mr Alan McFarlane, a South Australian owner, raised 7,500 guineas, silencing the opposition. There was a very hearty cheering as the name of the buyer was announced, but before the horse left the ring it was given out that Mr McFarlane was acting on behalf of Mrs Walter Mitchell. The price paid for Trafalgar is easily a record for an Australian-bred stallion.' While Trafalgar returned home to the Upper Murray, his sale was a public finale for a sibling disagreement.



Image 3. Trafalgar at Towong Hill 10 October 1925 (right)
Photograph by Frederick Herbert, private collection

Trafalgar lived out his retirement at Towong Hill. In 1929 he was shot after breaking his leg. He had lived to a fine old age but his progeny were never to achieve their sire's fine record.

It is fitting that Trafalgar as a fine old figure in Australian racing history is remembered along with the story of how the Upper Murray lost the Cup to an outsider. Meanwhile, there is always the hope that one day the Upper Murray will send another miracle horse, one that will remind Flemington of the spirit that is still here in the bush!

Honor Auchinleck

(With assistance from the Australian Racing Museum)



Image 4. Victoria Racing Club's Melbourne Club 1910 Jubilee trophy. Source: Magazine extract, private collection