St Andrew’s College

ANZAC Day Service, 27 April 2014

Cecil Hope Cohen (1888-1918) and Cedric Keith Cohen (1890-1952)

Two young Jewish undergraduates entered St Andrew’s College on the same day in 1909. They shared the surname Cohen, but were unrelated. The younger of the two, Cedric, was the first-born son of one of the first resident students in College, John Jacob Cohen, who had become an architect, engineer, barrister and long-serving Member of the Legislative Assembly, and later a judge of the District Court.\(^1\) Cedric had been educated at Sydney Grammar School and came to the University of Sydney at the age of 19 to study Medicine. He spent the entire five years of his medical course as a resident at Andrew’s, leaving College in 1914 before World War I broke out.\(^2\)

Cecil Hope Cohen, twenty months older than Cedric, had also attended Sydney Grammar School, but did not enter College until his third year of his Arts degree. Cecil stayed in College for only two years, acquiring his Arts degree and studying some Law.\(^3\) Although he did not complete a Law degree, he practised as a barrister in Sydney before World War I. His father had been a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales since 1896 and before that had been a Member of the Legislative Assembly representing Maitland.\(^4\) The father, Henry Emanuel Cohen, was seventeen years older than John Jacob Cohen and died in 1912, so the phases of the two men’s comparable careers did not synchronise, but they had much in common and it is clear that the two Cohen families were well acquainted.

When Cedric’s grandfather, Jacob Hollander, died in 1905, Cecil also attended the very grand funeral, along with members of other prominent Jewish families in Sydney.\(^5\) Conversely in 1912, when Cecil’s father died, John Jacob Cohen attended the equally grand funeral.\(^6\) The two families were closely linked through both the Jewish community and the College.

As students at College together in 1909, Cecil and Cedric did not play any College sport but both played for the University’s hockey team, while Cecil represented College in debating.\(^7\) After Cecil left at the end of 1910, Cedric continued to play University hockey and was awarded a half-blue in 1913.\(^8\) Cedric also developed an interest in billiards and was Secretary of the Billiards Committee in 1911.\(^9\) Although

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\(^2\) St Andrew’s College Archives [SACA], College Roll, 1909-1914.
\(^3\) SACA, College Roll, 1909-1911.
\(^6\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 January 1912, p.18.
\(^7\) *St Andrew’s College Magazine* [SACM], vol.2, July 1909, pp.8, 13.
\(^8\) SACM, vol.11, August 1914, p.4.
\(^9\) SACM, vol.6, August 1911, p.ii; vol.7, December 1911, p.ii.
he never represented the College at tennis, he certainly played the game and in 1912 he won the College doubles handicap with a high-flying partner. 10

Cedric’s father was very visibly interested in his old College throughout this period. John Jacob Cohen was Vice-President of the Students’ Club in 1908, 1909 and again in 1913, while he was also President of the newly formed Past Students’ Union in 1909. 11

Both the young Cohens graduated and started careers before World War I broke out, Cecil as a barrister, Cedric as a house surgeon at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. 12 They both went off to war in France, Cedric to join the British Royal Army Medical Corps in March 1915. 13 Cecil was not allowed to enlist in Australia, so followed Cedric overseas and enlisted in the British Royal Garrison Artillery.

We know very little about the service careers of either Cedric or Cecil. More than half of the 6.5 million British records of personnel in World War I were destroyed by German bombing in World War II, and the files of both Cohens were among those burnt. 14

Cecil, however, is known to have served in an Officer Cadet corps. In October 1916 he became a Second Lieutenant in the British special reserve and joined the Royal Garrison Artillery in France two months later. 15 In 1918 he was severely wounded and died in England a week after the Armistice. 16 The following day, 19 November 1918, Cecil Cohen was buried in the Jewish cemetery in the London suburb of Willesden. 17

Cedric may have been present at his friend’s death-bed, because he returned to London at the end of the war and did post-graduate studies as house surgeon at the Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital. Once he had established his credentials as an eye surgeon, Cedric returned to Sydney and until his retirement in 1950 he was ‘well-known and well-loved’ in his profession. He was attached to Sydney Hospital throughout his career and was always the last doctor to leave the Hospital at the end of the day.

When the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons was founded in 1932, he was one of the first Fellows and in 1932 he was President of the Ophthalmological Society of

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14 I am indebted to Fiona Burn of the National Archives of Australia for her expert assistance.
New South Wales.\textsuperscript{18} He was also closely associated with the University of Sydney, where he established the Diploma in Ophthalmology in 1945.\textsuperscript{19}

Cedric Cohen found time in his busy life for competent piano-playing and for very accomplished amateur theatricals.\textsuperscript{20} As a student at College, he had been known for his extrovert behaviour. As a fresher at his first musical evening in 1909 Cedric attracted attention by wearing vivid red, white and blue pyjamas and when he provided the entertainment for the Annual Smoke Concert for Past Students in October 1909, his father, then the President of the Past Students Union, prudently sent his apologies.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1933, Cedric, along with the son of the Governor, Sir Philip Game, attracted very favourable press comment for his role in a ‘terse, topical and mordant’ revue called \textit{Snappy Sydney}, produced by the celebrated Beryl Bryant. At performances for medical charities in Sydney, Parramatta, Goulburn and Canberra, Cedric got warm press reviews for his sketch about inebriation, but the highlight of the show was his skit called ‘Done’, which lampooned a fashionable Eastern Suburbs institution, the Doone Ladies’ Finishing School, as an academy where young ladies are ‘finished before they are begun’.\textsuperscript{22}

Cedric was also a prominent Freemason and a devoted chairman of Legacy’s Medical Committee, renowned for his kindliness to patients and friends alike. He does not seem to have played any role in College affairs during his long ascendancy as an eye-surgeon, although he joined the Alumni Society when it was formed in 1946 and remained a member until his death.\textsuperscript{23}

He married twice and had two children, Bettina (who married Donald Silver and lived in Europe) and Brian (who studied Arts/Law at College between 1945 and 1950\textsuperscript{24} and became a judge of the Supreme Court). Only two years after his retirement at the age of 60, Cedric died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1952, 33 years after his friend Cecil Cohen. He was warmly remembered as a man and as a surgeon in obituaries in prominent medical journals in both Australia and Britain.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Centenary Book of the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine}, ed. J.A. Young, A.J. Sefton and N. Webb, 1984, pp.421, 471.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 11 October 1933, p.12; 18 October 1933, p.17; \textit{Canberra Times}, 20 November 1933, p.2.
\textsuperscript{23} Andrews, 1949, p.60; 1950, p.68.
\textsuperscript{24} SACA, College Roll, 1945-1950.