



St Andrew's College

ESTABLISHED 1867

Robert Rainy HARPER (Fr 1913)

The first lesson, from Ecclesiasticus, exhorts us to sing the praises of famous people, our ancestors in their generations. Today we focus on the contribution of an Androvian who gave much in service to a nation in war, and who was a member of a family whose generations have given, and continue to give, so generously to St Andrew's and the broader community.

Robert Rainy Harper was born in Melbourne in 1894, the son of Rev Professor Andrew Harper, and his second wife Barbara Harriet (nee Rainy). When his father became Principal of St Andrew's College in 1902, Robert moved with his parents and siblings to take up residence in the new Principal's Lodge (now known as Harper House), and to attend Sydney Grammar School. Upon completion of his schooling, he entered the University of Sydney as an Arts student in 1913, transferring to Medicine the following year. He lived in College as a resident student, rather than in the Lodge with his family.

A tall, well-built man, Harper impressed in College sport, as a rugby forward and in the number 4 seat in the rowing eights in 1913. He was awarded a University blue in Rugby in the same year. In 1914, he was elected to the Students' Club football committee and gained a University blue in rowing, having joined three of his fellow Androvians in the Sydney University boat for the university championships in Adelaide.

Like his father, Robert was patriotic. At Sydney Grammar he had served as a Second Lieutenant in the school cadet Corps, and while at University he was a sergeant in the University Scouts, attaining the rank of Second Lieutenant in the 26th Infantry before postponing his medical studies to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force.

Harper sailed from Sydney in June 1915. He fought at Gallipoli and in Egypt as a 1st lieutenant with the 20 battalion of the 1st AIF, and went on to serve with distinction in France in 1916. Promoted to captain in July 1916, he was wounded in action on seven separate occasions between May and August 1916. He led one of four parties in an attack aimed at capturing the Old German lines south of Pozières and, although the other parties were checked, he and his men took their objective and held it for an hour under heavy fire. Harper was wounded in the head and leg, first by gunshot and then by a bomb, but continued to direct his troops until they ran out of grenades; his party then retreated across no man's land with Harper refusing to be removed until he had seen all his men to safety. This gallantry during a long hour in the enemy trenches at Pozieres was mentioned in despatches, and recognised with the award of the Distinguished Service Order, a decoration rarely awarded to a lieutenant, while the President of France awarded him the Croix de Guerre.

With gun and bayonet wounds to the head and to the leg, Captain Harper was sent back to Australia in November 1916, and his service with the AIF ended in May 1917. When his health had recovered sufficiently, he became Commanding Officer of the recruiting Depot at Liverpool until 1919. He then re-enrolled in medicine and became a resident student in College again in 1921 and 1922.



St Andrew's College

ESTABLISHED 1867

He was no doubt inspired by his much older step-sister, Margaret, who graduated in Medicine at Sydney in 1906 and was a very prominent paediatrician. He was also aware that his maternal great-grandfather, Harry Rainy, had been Professor of Forensic Medicine at the University of Glasgow.

By the time of Robert's return to College, his father was no longer Principal, having retired in September 1920. He did remain, however, as Hunter Baillie Professor of Hebrew in the Theological Hall for three more years. Robert may have attended the formal dinner in 1923 when Principal Anderson and the student body invited Dr Harper 'to sit for one last time in his old place at dinner'. He undoubtedly would have approved of what he heard his father say, that:

It ought to be the object of the University, and of the Colleges above all, to turn out men fitted and willing to be devoted soldiers of humanity... You are those chose to be at least the subaltern officers in the great army of humanity, on whom, together with the indistinguished throng of private soldiers, as in all wars, the result of the war of good against evil must, under God, depend.

Robert Harper, however, dropped out of Medicine in 1922 and moved to Melbourne, where he joined the Holden car manufacturing business, rising in 1928 to Manager of the company where car bodies were built in conjunction with General Motors. He did not live to see the 1948 genesis of Holden's own Australian model, for he died in 1941 from the long-term effects of the head wounds he had suffered in 1916.

In 1924, soon after he started work with Holden's in Melbourne, Harper married Sylvia Lance at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Phillip Street, Sydney. A prominent tennis player, Sylvia won the Australian Women's Championship in 1924, in which year she was ranked in the top 10 in the world, and continued to play at the highest level until 1930.

Robert and Sylvia had one child, a son Ian Rainy Lance Harper, born in Melbourne in January 1932. After Robert's death in 1941, Sylvia moved back to Sydney, living in a flat in Darling Point. Ian was educated initially at Scotch College, Melbourne and later at The Scots College in Sydney, before entering St Andrew's College in 1950, studying Arts. Principal Cumming Thom wrote to the widowed Sylvia in March 1950, saying that:

We shall be happy to see the grandson of the former Principal and the son of a distinguished soldier with us in College, and every effort will be made to smooth his path.

Ian Harper resided at St Andrew's for four years, entering the law as a solicitor and becoming a partner in Allen Allen and Hemsley in 1960, a director of companies and a member of the Reserve Bank Board. He published his book on *Christian Theology and Market Economics* in 2008.



St Andrew's College

ESTABLISHED 1867

He served as a Councillor for St Andrew's for 26 years, from 1972 until 1997, and twice occupied the Chairmanship of Council, from 1979-1981 and again from 1991 until 1994. The strong Harper family connection with College continued with Ian's sons, Angus Graham Rainy Harper (Fr 1976) and Robert (Rob) Rainy Ian Harper (Fr 1979; and who was Chairman of Council for nine years from 2006-2014), and daughter Kate, a Councillor since 2019, and into a fifth generation, via Angus' son Alex (Fr 2007), and Rob's daughters Rebecca (Fr 2007), Jessica (Fr 2013) and Lily (Fr 2016).

The message from the second reading from St John is of the power of love, embodied in Christ's exhortation to love one another as he loves us.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul taught that Christ's resurrection, and his triumph over death, sorrow and sin can lead us out of present distress into a purer, nobler, more just world, where war and hatred and weakness will be subdued and the Kingdom of God will be established supreme.

We mourn the tragedy of life lost, yet commemorate the contribution in war, and in the building of our nation, of brave men like Robert Harper. This is a difficult balance, and is the reason why ANZAC Day is kept as a solemn memorial and not as a source for jubilation.

In the vestibule downstairs, written in Latin and in Greek, is an inscription, a passage from the Old Book commemorating duty and sacrifice:

"Whatever we loved in them, whatever we admire, remains and will continue in the hearts of mankind, and the fame of their deeds will be eternal."

Lest we forget.

Principal Wayne Erickson

25 April, 2022