

THE EPIC OF PERCY BROOKFIELD



The Sulphide Street Railway Station in 1969. The ornate building in the distance is the Trades Hall. JLW.

On the eve of March the twenty first,
Back in nineteen twenty one,
The express departed Sulphide Street ,
On its usual southward run.
To Adelaide most were destined,
Two hundred packed in tight,
With card games to amuse them
As they travelled through the night.

The Silver City, that most called home,
Had suffered more than most.
In torrid times of recent years,
With little it could boast.
The Turks, they had invaded,
And had shot up in the town,
And of fires, drought and dust-storms,
The place was well renown.

Brookfield was from Lancashire,
A figure tall and strong,
And eloquent and spoke his mind
Popularity did not take long.
As local parlance put it,
He had come there “from away”,
With digs at the *Duke of Cornwall*.
He was in the Hill to stay.

As a pugilist he was fearless,
Asset to any side that mattered.
Assailed by five, he fought the scrum,
Victorious, but battered.
When once a chap did threaten him,
‘Twould fill a lesser man with fear,
But Brookie calmly talked him round,
Then shouted him a beer.

Prime Minister, old Billy Hughes,
Was loyal to the Crown,
Saw conscription as the way ahead
To bring the Hun-folk down.
Our hero responded fervently,
“Traitor, viper and a skunk!”
They put him in the local goal
For a month it was his bunk.

In seventeen the miners agreed,
Percy Brookfield should be their bloke,
To join the Sydney Legislature, and
Free miners from the comp’ny yoke.
Brookfield eyed those with elected seats,
Libs, Labor and all the rest
A den of pure iniquity
And of the party he’d detest.

Phthisis was the miners’ scourge
From years and years of dust.
The mining firms all disagreed,
Miners deemed fresh air a must.
On top of it, the Spanish flu
Took a toll within the town.
Experts called from Sydney,
Report ignored, miners all put down.

So, the miners withdrew their labour
And the strike went on and lasted.
And further on and on it went.
Brookfield’s name was surely blasted.
Eighty weeks less three, the strike ran;
Starvation, scrounging whatever was
able.
But the companies ceded in the end
And a miner had food on his table.

Brookfield travelled on that slow ex-
press,
Across the Mundi Mundi Plains,
To take his Sydney Assembly seat
Via Melbourne - five different trains!
Rumour was that on the way,
He was about to stake a claim
On behalf of all the workers
For the leases - ‘twas his game.

The Broken Hill Express that night,
Rattling on its narrow track,
Through Mannahill and Paratoo
In SA’s way outback
Gumbowie was the clarion call,
“All change!” cried out the guard
From here the gauge was wider
Drifting into Terowie’s yard.



Tomayeff. Photograph from the SA Police file held by State Records of South Australia.

Aboard that train, a sullen soul,
With a one-way ticket south,
And clutching a small portmanteau
Not a word came from his mouth.
Koorman Tomayeff, Russian it was said,
Seeking vineyard work in Clare.
He would change again at Riverton,
And asked when he’d be there.



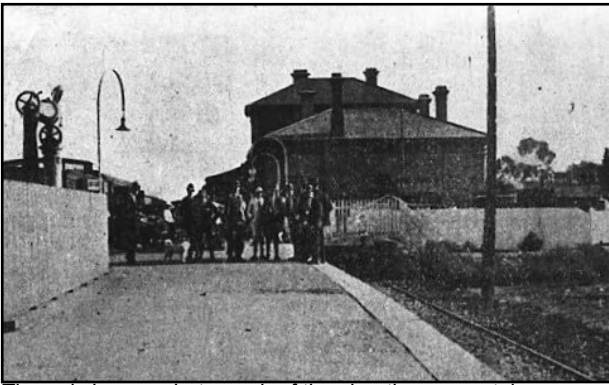
Riverton Railway Station c1914. The photograph was taken from the southern end of the station and the train is an Adelaide-bound express headed by an S class engine. The shooting was at the other end of the station. Photo courtesy of the State Library of South-Australia B 68909

At Riverton, a scheduled halt
At the railway refreshment joint.
Brookfield chatting over eggs and toast
All nodding yea to every point.
A loud report, and two more shots
Hit near the refresh door
The Russian firing indiscriminately,
But his aiming mostly poor.

Then Crowhurst from Oodlawirra
Copped a bullet in the thigh.
At first it seemed a minor wound
But from it he would die.
Kinsela was a constable
From Broken Hill had been aboard,
His hand-gun in his luggage
He had fortuitously stored.

Kinsela went back to the train, and then
To Brookfield passed the gun.
The Russian still kept firing on,
Reloading with each volley done.
Brookie calmly walked towards him
Intent, we think, to peacefully disarm
And apparently of a firm belief
He'd be spared of any harm.

The Russian was sprouting jibberish,
And of mentality most demented
Brookfield came on, unflinching
With intention fully cemented
Two quick shots into the abdomen
Stopped poor Percy sound,
Kinsela first, then others in pursuit
Brought the Russian to the ground.



The only known photograph of the shooting scene taken on the day - from the *Observer*

They asked the wounded Brookfield
Why he'd taken such a risk.
To which he gave an answer,
Made remarkably frank and brisk.
For the ladies he had done it,
Spoken though in mortal pain.
"I am nothing" quietly uttered
For he knew that he'd been slain.

In the van they made him comfy
And the express was sent non-stop
In the hope that Adelaide's Hospital
Could save him with their op.
But despite the best intentions
Of the surgeons, later on that day
Our hero's fate was certain
And he sadly passed away.

One last journey on that same express
A final homeward passage, made
To a mourning Silver City
In Trades Hall his body was laid.
On Good Friday he went to his grave,
Two thirds of the city, his brothers.
His memorial still towers by far,
Proud and high above all the others

Political assassination was widely said;
There had been a hope up in the Hill,
A court case hearing to evoke the facts,
Closure had been the town's will.
Mick Considine was duly consulted
If he could offer advice or a deed
As the Federal member or rep.
But naught could fill the need.

South Australia, over keen, it seemed,
To be rid of the whole nasty lot
Had no concern regards the facts
And whether there'd been a plot.
They got a couple of ordinary docs
The Russian, to report his state of mind
Insanity "at the Governor's pleasure"
His life he would hence unwind.

Barriev Daily Truth

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BROKEN HILL, MONDAY, MARCH 26, 1921.

ONE PENNY.

VALE BROOKFIELD : WORKERS BURY THEIR DEAD.

Inspiring, Impressive and Touching Ceremony.

Fifteen Thousand at Graveside of Faithful Friend.

Back at Broken Hill
That news they would greet
From Railway town, the South
And down old Argent Street
One of sheer and utter dismay,
South Australia, a long-time friend,
Could treat them in this way.
For answers, it spelt the end.

On a corner block in Sulphide Street
And hanging high up on the wall
A framed photograph of Brookfield
In his much-revered Trades Hall.
It reveals a kindly countenance
And he smiles down at the lot
For in Broken Hill and elsewhere
He will surely not be forgot.

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