

Sandes, John (1863–1938)

by Ken Stewart

This article was published in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, (MUP), 1988.

John **Sandes** (1863-1938), journalist, poet and novelist, was born on 26 February 1863 at Cork, Ireland, son of Rev. Samuel Dickson **Sandes**, Church of Ireland clergyman, and his wife Sophia Julia, née Besnard. His grandfather was sometime bishop of Killaloe, Clare. Taken to England in 1872, John was educated at King's College School, London, Trinity College, Stratford-on-Avon, and Magdalen College, Oxford (B.A., 1885).

Eighteen months after his arrival in Australia in January 1887, **Sandes** joined the staff of the Melbourne *Argus*. With E. T. Fricker and D. Symmons he inaugurated, in August 1891, 'The Passing Show' by 'Oriël', a popular and durable Saturday feature which brought together topical gossip and whimsy, conservative social and political comment, solemn ethical speculation, and light and serious verse. **Sandes**, sole author from 1898 to 1903, published two selections of his verse from the column: *Rhymes of the Times* (1898), light reading which aimed to 'stir a generous emotion of pride or patriotism, of sympathy or pity'; and the solemn, Kiplingesque *Ballads of Battle* (1900), which foreshadowed many poetic responses to World War I, stressing British and Imperial links and traditions of honour and duty, while recognizing Australian national types, bush connexions and the agonies of war for both sides. Such poems as the widely anthologized 'With Death's Prophetic Ear' established **Sandes** as probably the most widely read, proficient and influential local poet of the South African War.

Sandes married Clare Louise (d.1928), daughter of former Victorian premier [Sir Graham Berry](#), at All Saints, St Kilda, on 24 November 1897. She made her stage début in 1901. In June 1903 they moved to Manly, Sydney. He joined the *Daily Telegraph*, started the column 'A Bird's Eye View', and for sixteen years wrote leaders, articles, and dramatic, musical and literary reviews. His first novel, *Love and the Aeroplane* (1910), was published by [A. C. Rowlandson](#)'s New South Wales Bookstall Co. Ltd. It was followed by nine adventure romances, six under the pseudonym 'Don Delaney'. Their treatment of such subjects as bushranging, the gold rushes, and sporting-life exploits shows both 'democratic' and 'aristocratic' values. Many of **Sandes**'s poems and articles on World War I, including the long poem *Anzac Day, Landing in the Dawn* (1916), and the essay 'Australian National Character in the Crucible' (in *Australia To-Day*, 1918), are early and influential formulations of the 'Anzac legend'. In 1919 **Sandes** became the *Daily Telegraph*'s London correspondent, and attended the Versailles peace conference. He returned to Australasia in 1920 in H.M.S. *Renown* with the party of the Prince of Wales, whose tour he covered for the Australian Press Association, and permanently in 1922. Thereafter he wrote eclectically and prolifically for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, favouring articles on foreign policy and naval and military history. From 1925 to 1938 he edited the Sydney shipping magazine, *Harbour*: a fascination with seafaring is reflected in his five volumes of verse.

Determinedly patriotic, Christian, anti-socialist, a theatre-lover, **Sandes** was a dour yet affable man, whose writing and attitudes fused a love of British and Anglo-Irish tradition with a nationalistic

Australian self-awareness. After eighteen months illness from cancer, he died on 29 November 1938 at Wauchope, New South Wales, and was cremated in Sydney. His two sons survived him.