

FARQUHAR McCRAE MD — PORTRAIT OF A SURGEON

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Born in Scotland in 1807 of a well to do family, Farquhar McCrae received his medical training in Edinburgh and Paris. He was commissioned as Assistant Surgeon in the British Army and in 1839 migrated with his family to become a pioneer grazier, businessman and doctor in the settlement at Port Phillip. He later transferred to Sydney where he was one of the first surgeons elected to the staff of Sydney Infirmary in 1845. Farquhar McCrae died in 1850 after a short but eventful career.

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has acquired over the years a number of important art works. One of the large portraits confronting a visitor entering through the main foyer is that of Farquhar McCrae (Fig. 1). It is an imposing equestrian portrait



Fig. 1. Farquhar McCrae, Regimental Medical Officer, 6th Dragoon Guards, Equestrian portrait by Georgiana Huntly McCrae, 1837. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons).

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of a young military surgeon of the early 19th Century and was painted by McCrae's sister-in-law, Georgiana Huntly McCrae.^{1,2}

Farquhar McCrae is said to have been a member of a distinguished Scottish family. Born at Westbrook in 1807 he received a classical education from a private tutor and at the High School and University of Edinburgh. As he turned 17 he was articled for a period of 3 years to Robert Allan, senior operating surgeon at the Royal Infirmary, and Mr John Lizars whose teaching of Anatomy and Physiology attracted many young students to the Edinburgh College. Lizars' anatomical plates were based largely on McCrae's preparations and dissections, demonstrating his early skills and dedication in the field of morbid anatomy.³

McCrae's early study and application were rewarded with success. In his own words, "at the conclusion of my apprenticeship, being then in my twentieth year, I passed as surgeon before the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and immediately afterwards Mr Lizars (having previously examined me daily during six weeks as to my general professional acquirements) appointed me as demonstrator in his School of Anatomy." He was allowed one half of all students' fees and continued this appointment for almost 4 years. He obtained the degree MD of Edinburgh University in 1827 with a thesis entitled *De Morbis Auris* (J. T. D. Hall, Edinburgh University Library Archives, pers. comm.).

McCrae declined an opportunity to succeed John Lizars (who subsequently became Professor of Surgery to the Royal College of Surgeons) as lecturer in Anatomy, in favour of furthering his medical education in Paris. He had spent 7 years obtaining a broad fundamental experience and "acquiring those habits of thinking for himself, and of patient investigation, which are necessary in everyone who aspires to be more than a routine practitioner." That he did aspire to greater heights and was obviously inspired by the

enthusiasm, ambition and sheer academic brilliance of his many teachers in Edinburgh is evidenced by his assiduous attendance at the various clinical sessions throughout his training. His attitude was both positive and professional in that, from a very early stage, he determined "that no one can be a first rate, or even what is called a sound surgeon, however dexterous he may be as a mechanical operator, unless he be equally able as a physician".

McCrae spent 2 years in Paris where the hospitals appropriated to particular diseases provided for him a unique opportunity to study the practical aspects of medicine, surgery and midwifery. At the Hospital de la Pitie, McCrae became acquainted with M. Louis, whom Abercrombie designated "the most philosophical physician in Europe", and through him acquired a self-imposed discipline of patient investigation particularly in relation to chest diseases and the use of the stethoscope. He daily performed operations on the dead body under the patronage of some of the leading surgeons in Paris.

Farquhar McCrae had an ambition to work at the General Hospital at Chatham, receiving hospital for all invalids in the British Army. Although he had no real desire to enter the Army as a profession, McCrae realized the opportunities offered by service at Chatham and found a champion for his cause in the Duke of Gordon. Despite his direct intervention, there appeared to be no simple access to a commission. At a time when so many of his contemporaries were trying to join the Services it would be interesting to conjecture on the variety of social and economic factors influencing a young medical graduate to join the British Army or Navy, much depleted after the Napoleonic wars. In 1831 there were over 700 candidates awaiting appointment. Director General of the Army Medical Department at that time was another Scot, Sir James McGrigor, who was no doubt instrumental in recalling McCrae to London the following year to enter the examination at the Army Medical Board and then to be appointed curator of the museum at Chatham. McCrae played an important part in establishing an extensive collection of pathology specimens and preparations, showing a particular interest in the cause and effect of diseases of climate, there being no comprehension of a germ theory of disease in the 1830s. After 3 years, and with his health impaired as a result of a dissecting injury, McCrae sought to resign the post at Chatham only to be offered a regimental appointment with the 6th Dragoons. He was commissioned as an Assistant Surgeon on 28 September 1832 and served with the 6th Dragoon Guards (The Inniskillings) from 4 December 1835 for a further period of 3 years.⁴ Some of this time was spent in the hospitals at Canterbury and Norwich. Having spent much of the winter confined to the house, McCrae transferred to half pay. Sir James McGrigor wrote in a testimonial

dated 25 January 1839, "bad health compelled Dr McCrae to leave a Regiment where he was respected and beloved".⁵ On his own initiative and the medical advice of his colleagues, McCrae decided to seek a warmer climate.

Farquhar McCrae was one of seven children and the youngest son of William Gordon McCrae and his wife Margaret (née Morison). Most of the McCrae family eventually emigrated to Australia and they all receive a mention in *Georgiana's Journal*.

Allowing for a liberal sprinkling of inaccuracies, the diary of the artist Georgiana Huntly McCrae, later published as *Georgiana's Journal*, is a useful source of information regarding the McCrae family.⁶ The London born daughter of George, Marquis of Huntly and afterwards fifth Duke of Gordon, Georgiana lived for a time at Gordon Castle. There she married Andrew Morison McCrae, elder brother of Farquhar, a writer to the signet and kinsman of the Gordons. It is significant that Andrew and Georgiana had eight children, all of them christened with the family name Gordon.

Her diary for the year 1839 records, "In March 1839 Dr Farquhar McCrae, his wife (Agnes Morison) and child, Mrs McCrae, Miss Thomas, Aunt Margaret and servant sailed from Leith per *Midlothian* for Port Phillip and Sydney". Other sources suggest that the McCraes brought two children to Australia, and the Miss Thomas and Aunt Margaret referred to were his sisters, Thomas Anne and Margaret Forbes McCrae. McCrae's eldest brother Alexander, a Captain of the 84th Regiment, also came to live in Victoria.

The *Midlothian* was a 414 ton barque built at Sunderland in 1835. By coincidence it was used as a convict ship from Dublin in 1852 when the surgeon was one David Thomas.⁷ Margaret Forbes McCrae was to marry another Dr David Thomas who became one of the outstanding figures in the early medical history of Victoria. The *Midlothian* in 1839 was the first ship to sail direct to Port Phillip and the McCraes disembarked in June after a voyage lasting 3 months.

The family lived for a time in Great Bourke Street where McCrae established a practice. David John Thomas from South Wales also arrived at Port Phillip in 1839 and the following year he and Farquhar McCrae entered into partnership.⁸ Thomas had been a student at Swansea Infirmary and later at University College Hospital, London, where he came under the influence of the great surgeon Robert Liston. He was closely associated with the foundation of the Melbourne Hospital and was appointed its first surgeon.

By November 1839 the first public institution was founded in Melbourne. This was the Melbourne School of Arts and Mechanic's Institute. Its first president was Captain Lonsdale and the Rev. J. Clow and Dr Farquhar McCrae were vice-presidents. The

inaugural address was delivered in April 1840 by a young Irish barrister, Redmond Barry, who spoke on the subject "The Art of Agriculture".⁹

With the growth of Melbourne's population, the Superintendent of the Settlement of Port Phillip was soon overwhelmed by applications for admission to the small Military Hospital. Charles La Trobe wrote to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney in November 1840, "Sir, I beg leave to draw His Excellency's attention to the necessity that exists for the erection of a permanent hospital in this town".¹⁰ To which the Governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps, made the following remarks, "I cannot consider it the business of the Government to provide a general hospital for the District of Port Phillip or even for the Town of Melbourne. Such institutions are properly the objects of private charity, but if public support or assistance is in any way to be given to them it should be by means of local rates. Whenever Government hospitals are established a practice has certainly grown up of admitting paupers to them free of expense, but bad as this is in principle it would be still worse to erect out of the general funds of the Government a hospital expressly for their use".¹⁰

A public meeting held on the 5 March 1841 was chaired by La Trobe. The following resolution was moved by Dr Farquhar McCrae: "that steps be taken forthwith to establish a public hospital in Melbourne to be called 'The Melbourne Hospital', the design of which shall be to admit both contributing and non-contributing patients".

Tenders were called for the first building in January 1846 after prolonged and sometimes bitter arguments with the Government regarding finance and land grants. The foundation stone was laid on 20 March by the Mayor of Melbourne, Dr James Palmer.

By this time Farquhar McCrae had established a surgical practice in Sydney. In the interim he had followed the trend of learned men transplanted to a new colony. He was a pioneer in a pioneer society. In these years before the discovery of gold in Australia members of the medical profession were prominent in local government, industry and other enterprises. This was particularly so with the pastoral industry. A list of pastoral pioneers with land holdings in the Port Phillip District in 1851 included more than 40 medical men.¹¹ A number of these were Scottish graduates born and bred on farms, who had subsequently abandoned any ambition to practice medicine in Scotland where supply exceeded demand. Nevertheless, through these men, the honour and prestige of Edinburgh University, Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews were dissipated far and wide as many young graduates from these temples of learning subsequently emigrated to the colonies.

As Crowley suggested when writing on the Constitution Act of 1842 and this period in the political



Fig. 2. Miniature portrait of Farquhar McCrae painted by Georgiana Huntly McCrae circa 1842.

history of New South Wales: "medicos were relatively abundant, because many came to Australia in the convict service; they contributed to learning, to politics, and also to mutual back-biting".¹²

Some doctors took up pastoral leases as investments (or perhaps the equivalent to today's hobby farms) but others were pioneers in the true sense, devoting their energies and experience to establishing a new industry.¹³ McCrae (Fig. 2) developed an interest in several pastoral leases close to Melbourne, giving the name to Moreland (an out-lying Melbourne suburb) and he took over Captain Lonsdale's property (Big Hill) in the area now known as Dandenong as early as 1839, as well as an adjoining run called Eumemmering.

Meanwhile, new arrivals from all directions, particularly across Bass Strait, helped to establish the young colony at Port Phillip. One of them was Dr Alexander Thomson, a native of Aberdeen, who had settled in Hobart in 1831 and moved to the new settlement in 1836. The following year he made his home on the Barwon, naming the homestead 'Kardinia' and thereafter becoming one of the founders of Geelong. Apart from being five times Mayor and a major landholder in the district, Thomson initiated or became involved in a number of important business enterprises. These included the Marine Fire Insurance Company, The Port Phillip Steam Navigation Company, The Melbourne Auction Company, the Pastoral and Agricultural Society of Australia Felix,

the Methodist Missionary Society and the Port Phillip and Melbourne Bank.

This latter institution, though short lived, is the one of interest to us, as among those listed as directors was Farquhar McCrae. I will quote a brief reference from the well known chronicler of the times, the Irishman Edmund Finn, who published under the name 'Garryowen'.¹⁴ "The colonists took it into their heads to set up a Bank of their own, but the maiden essay at bank-making, though not terminating in a smash, after a short life and a merry one died a natural death." A meeting of the projectors was held on the 25 June 1839, and the following basis of operations was agreed on: It was to be known as "The Melbourne and Port Phillip Bank," with a capital of £60 000 in 1500 £40 shares. A prospectus was approved, and a provisional managerial board was elected. Another meeting was held in Williams' auction room on 2 December — Mr G. D. Mercer presiding — when it was agreed to double the number of shares, i.e. 3000, to increase the capital to £120 000, and change the title to "The Port Phillip Bank". The first Directory consisted of Messrs Farquhar McCrae, D. S. Campbell, Charles Williams, Thomas Wills, S. Craig, P. W. Welsh, F. A. Powlett, C. Howard, Alex Thomson, and Foster Fyans, the defeated candidates being Messrs H. F. Gisborne, J. P. Fawcner and Captain Smyth. The Managing Director was Mr John Gardiner.

Great results were anticipated from this venture, but were never realized. At a meeting of the shareholders on the 30 December 1842, it was decided "that the Bank should cease to carry on business, and that its affairs be wound up and cleared with as little delay as may be consistent with prudence". Wound up it was accordingly, and, however its shareholders fared, not a shilling was lost by depositor or customer. The collapse might have been attributed to the free-and-easy manner in which some of the directors accommodated themselves and their friends. They regarded the bank simply as a 'mutual accommodation' pie, and accordingly kept their own fingers in it.

Several years after the Bank's closing, a notification, signed by F. D. Wickham and J. W. Howey as Trustees, appeared in the newspapers of the 3 May 1851, intimating that a deed of release was ready for execution by shareholders, "and that a final dividend of 9d per £10 share should be paid to them on such execution".¹⁴

As Garryowen noted, the financial ambitions of those primarily involved in The Port Phillip Bank were never realized, and while some of the directors may have gained by dipping into the till perhaps Messrs Gisborne, Fawcner and Smyth considered themselves fortunate to have been voted out of this enterprise.

K. S. Inglis, in his book entitled *Hospital and*

Community — a History of the Royal Melbourne Hospital, has suggested that a number of doctors, including Farquhar McCrae, became squatters and virtually abandoned their profession.⁸ Some, of course, were to resume medical practice when once again it became lucrative after the discovery of gold.

McCrae's partner David Thomas continued to practice throughout; he was a thoughtful and cultivated man, was instrumental in founding the Melbourne Club, and was a member of the first medical staff appointed to the new hospital when it opened in 1848. He has also been described as a "cheerful, impulsive, warm hearted man with a vivid sense of humour".¹⁰ In September 1847 he presented a paper to a meeting of the Port Phillip Medical Society on "The Inhalation of the vapour of ether with cases". Although William Pugh in Launceston first administered ether on 7 June 1847, Thomas pioneered its use in Melbourne and read the first scientific paper in Victoria.

This dramatic breakthrough in surgery, and the subsequent introduction of safe chloroform anaesthesia in 1848, came at a time when Farquhar McCrae was an established surgeon in Sydney. While he no doubt appreciated and utilized the advantages of painless surgery he is not generally recognized as one of the pioneers in this field. However, it is assumed, possibly correctly, that Surgeon McCrae was responsible for the introduction of another important medical innovation to Australia. This was the monaural stethoscope, devised by the Breton physician Laennec in 1791, and expertly demonstrated by M. Louis during McCrae's visit to Paris.

While Kerr's Directory for 1842 listed the address: Physician: Farquhar McCrae, JP, 'La Rose', Moonee Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, McCrae also retained the Dandenong holding for many years. The property of Eumemmering was soon transferred to John Leslie Foster, a nephew of Lord Fitzgerald. It was this transaction which was to cause a stir in the upper stratum of society. Foster was not satisfied with his purchase and refused to pay the full price. The forties were 'horse-whipping' days and when an opportunity presented on 1 December 1843, Foster intercepted McCrae riding up Queen Street and hammered both horse and man so fiercely that McCrae became unseated.

McCrae was accused of sharp dealings and responded in a gentlemanly way, by letter, referring to the money owed to him. When challenged by Foster, McCrae fiddled out neatly by saying that Foster, as a man of honour, should first of all discharge his debts and, afterwards, his pistols. The doctor made a claim in court for damages amounting to £2000, but eventually had to settle for £250.⁷

At this time McCrae had other problems including a debt he owed his brother Alexander over a long

period. It was a debt he was unable to discharge, despite the court decision in his favour against the man who was to succeed Lonsdale as Colonial Secretary. So acute in fact were his financial problems that he had visited Sydney in May 1843 with a view to setting up a new practice. Presumably the prospect of greater opportunities for success must have been apparent but he may have sought a warmer climate for health reasons. In his own words,

being in the field at a very early period of the colony (Port Phillip), my practice after two years was the best in it. My health, however, having suffered from the great fatigue I had to endure in my debilitated state, I resigned my practice, and went to reside at a farm which I had a few miles from Melbourne. Here the air and exercise completely restored my wanted vigour, and circumstances having determined me to resume the practice of my profession, I came to reside in Sydney about ten months ago, because it presented a field so much larger than that of Melbourne.³

His situation was becoming desperate as he submitted these words with testimonials in support of an application to join the staff of the new Sydney Dispensary.

McCrae was advised from London that Sir James McGrigor had never removed his name from the Army List so that he could still be eligible for a Surgency in the Regiment. Throughout the latter part of 1844 he seriously considered this alternative if attempts to establish a practice in Sydney proved unsuccessful. Indeed by the end of August he informed his brother that money was short, "having only taken eleven guineas since I arrived at Sydney".

Here he came in contact with William Bland, "a real surgeon, the first bright light in squalid times". Both Bland and William Redfern had been naval surgeons, both convicts subsequently pardoned, and together they bridged the gap between authoritarian military service in Sydney and private practice.¹⁵

1842 was the year in which the Sydney Municipal Council was established and on a broader scale the Constitution Act of 1842 provided for representative government in New South Wales. Dr Bland, described as "that warhorse of the emancipist liberals", was one of 24 men voted onto the first Legislative Council in 1843 and was obviously politically active at the time of McCrae's arrival in Sydney.¹⁶

In 1843 The Dispensary was incorporated by Act of Parliament and this institution then became known as the Sydney Infirmary and Dispensary.¹⁷

Transportation of convicts to New South Wales had ceased in 1841 and gradually the need for maintaining a medical establishment for their care declined. In their place the patient load from the general population, particularly the poor and the

homeless, increased. Those who were able to contribute towards their own support were required to pay 1s 6d per day at the Infirmary. This institution eventually transferred to the central part of Macquarie's hospital complex, formerly the Convict Hospital, in 1848.

The medical staff elected in March 1845 consisted of two physicians, John Macfarlane MD and George Fullerton MD, two surgeons, Charles Nathan FRCS, and Farquhar McCrae MD, and a resident surgeon and apothecary, Hugh Houston; four district surgeons and a matron, Mrs Baxter. The Infirmary was opened (in the south wing of the old Rum Hospital) for the reception of patients on 3 July 1845.^{17,18}

It had been McCrae's stated intention originally to seek appointment as a physician as he considered himself better equipped in this area of medical practice. However, he was convinced that the Infirmary, with its small number of beds and its convenient central location, would soon become essentially a surgical hospital. At last, with this appointment, he seemed to achieve some status, some public recognition, and a real chance for continued success within his profession.

Surgical practice at the Infirmary was placed under certain restrictions, as no surgeon was allowed to perform a capital operation without previous consultation with the other surgeon and at least one physician. Not so in private practice, though ironically McCrae's professional future was affected adversely by circumstances relating to a second consultation.

A notorious disagreement between McCrae and William Bland arose over the management of a patient suffering from "acute inflammation of the knee joint (synovitis)". Farquhar McCrae treated his patient with leeches, cathartics, solution of tartar emetic, and even applied a blister to the swollen joint with some degree of success. He prescribed calomel and opium as recommended by "Sir Astley Cooper and Baron Dupuytren and other great practical modern surgeons". Following some marked improvement over 4 weeks she suffered a relapse. Six dozen leeches were applied to the joint and a powerful cathartic appeared to be justified. As the relatives requested a second opinion, Mr Bland was cordially invited to attend in consultation. Bland disagreed with the former treatment regime and advised urgent pencilling of the whole limb with diluted tincture of iodine.¹⁹

Further consultation led to accusations of indiscretion and improper conduct, remarks which McCrae did not hesitate to put in writing and which Dr Bland steadfastly denied. Both men sought to obtain support from witnesses and colleagues so that factions developed within the medical profession.

In March 1846, McCrae commenced a public exchange of his correspondence with Bland by

publishing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* "in consequence of there being no Medical Association or Publication". William Bland retaliated by denouncing McCrae as a coward, a rather surprising challenge in the light of his earlier transportation on a murder conviction following a duel in Bombay. McCrae obviously favoured discretion and preferred the pen to settle whatever dispute arose from a difference of opinion — parrying such insults as "disreputable, cowardly and unworthy of being called a gentleman" with "unprofessional and dishonest". He concluded that he "would not allow a precedent to be established which would render to a medical man in these colonies a case of pistols as indispensable as a case of lancets."

Not only the community standing, but essentially the professional reputations of both men suffered as a result of these events. William Bland was defeated in the Parliamentary elections of 1848 and was excluded from the first Senate of Sydney University. This circumstance provided him with yet another opportunity to seek the "satisfaction of a gentleman".¹⁶

The constitution of the Sydney Dispensary and Infirmary allowed for the physicians and surgeons to hold office for a period of 4 years with one surgeon and a physician retiring at the end of every 2 years. McCrae's appointment was terminated at the end of 1846 and though he continued private practice from Castlereagh Street his health deteriorated and any further professional ambitions he may have had were totally frustrated. When he died in April 1850, he was only 43. Farquhar McCrae is buried in Melbourne's Fawkner Cemetery next to the grave of John Batman.

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