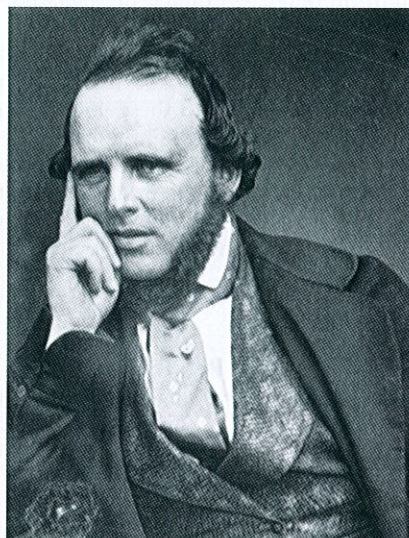


TREATING THE PAST

How Melbourne Medicine Came of Age



GODFREY HOWITT



DAVID JOHN THOMAS

FROM THE EARLIEST days of exploration and settlement of the Port Phillip district, medical men have been conspicuous and, in many instances, integral to the survival and growth of the colony. While the south eastern coastline was being explored (1792-1835), the surgeon was as important as the surveyor to have on board ship. From 1834, as land was taken up by pastoralists, medical men were prominent amongst the grazier-capitalists who laid claim to holdings around the bay and the fertile plains to the west, although they largely abandoned the practice of medicine as they took up their pastoral interests.¹

A subsequent group of medical men, however, who arrived in or before 1841, many working their passage from Great Britain as ship's surgeon, remained career practitioners. The apprenticeship papers, testimonials, academic and corporate affiliation certificates, and records of hospital training they brought with them suggest that they came as immigrants, intent on settling and establishing themselves in practice.

Among this group of doctors were fifteen signatories to a document of primary significance in the profession's history in Victoria. Formerly part of the AMA collection and now held in the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne, this document represents the first steps taken towards organising the essential professional medical institutions and regulatory bodies in the infant town. It takes the form of a handwritten petition addressed to Sir George Gipps, Governor of New South Wales and, although undated, was most likely planned for presentation to him on or around his visit to the settlement in October 1841.² The petition represents the earnest desire of a small and isolated community of medically trained men to form a professional body for mutual support in what was then a bleak settlement, far from the social and intellectual climate of home.³

The petition referred to the *Act 2nd Victoria No.22* passed in the Legislative Council (1837), which had led Governor Gipps to appoint a medical board to examine and authenticate the credentials of persons wishing to be declared legally qualified medical practitioners within the colony of New South Wales. This jurisdiction included the district of Port Phillip but there was 'much inconvenience, delay and even risk incurred in the transmission of the necessary documents to Sydney', which meant that a number of qualified Port Phillip doctors were not

registered. Keen to settle these irregularities, and to distinguish between unauthorised intruders who were drawing business away from those with approved qualifications, the petitioners—the undersigned Physicians, Surgeons and Surgeon-Apothecaries actually practicing in Melbourne—requested that Gipps might 'direct the establishment of a Branch Medical Board at Melbourne'.⁴

The biographies of the petition's fifteen signatories reveal some with substantial academic and professional profiles.

Patrick Edward Cussen MD (1792-1849), arrived in Sydney on the *Majestic* in 1837 and went to Port Phillip as government medical officer, where he purchased an allotment in the second Melbourne land auction. He was the first public vaccinator and ran the first one-room infirmary in

a sod hut on the western market site. In 1839, Cussen performed the first recorded surgical operation in the district. He was the first president of the Port Phillip Medical Board and inaugural president of the Port Phillip Medical Association in 1846.

Godfrey Howitt MD, FRCS (1800-73), arrived in Port Phillip (via Hobart) on the *Lord Goderich* in April 1840. He practised as a physician for thirty years on the corner of Spring and Collins Streets in Melbourne and was leader of the private practitioners fraternity. Howitt was honorary physician to the Melbourne Hospital and was appointed to the first Port Phillip Medical Board. He was an early member of the Port Phillip Medical Association and active as an anthropologist, explorer, naturalist, pastoralist and entomologist. He died at his Caulfield residence.

John Patterson MD (1789-1853), was born in County Tyrone, Nth Ireland, and sailed as assistant surgeon on the frigate *Blanche* in 1810. He was a surgeon in the Royal Navy in 1816 and surgeon on the emigrant ship *John Barry*. He sailed, with his family, as surgeon superintendent on the emigrant ship *Argyle*, arriving in December 1838. Patterson first registered in NSW in 1839 and arrived in Port Phillip in the same year, becoming the first immigration officer in 1841. He lived in Swanston Street and worked in private practice.

David John Thomas LSA, MRCS, MD, FRCS (1813-1871), was born in Wales and sailed as surgeon superintendent on the *Louis Campbell* with his sisters, arriving in Launceston in January 1839. He joined the first staff at the early Melbourne Hospital in Bourke Street as a surgeon in 1841 and was among the first elected surgeons at the new Melbourne Hospital in 1847, remaining there until 1853. Thomas was on the first committee of the Port Phillip Medical Association in 1846. He championed the use of anaesthesia and is believed to have been first in the district to use ether (for an amputation), and possibly also chloroform. He departed for Europe on the *Northumberland* with his wife and family in 1853, returning after completing his doctorate on '*Champion of the Seas*' at St Andrews, in November 1859. In 1865 he was president of the Medical Society of Victoria and he held appointments of official visitor to Kew Asylum, and honorary physician to the Deaf & Dumb Institute and to St James Training Institute. In 1867 he was president of the annual Ballarat Eisteddfod.

David Elliot Wilkie MD, MRCS, LRCS (1815-85), arrived in South Australia as surgeon superintendent on *Lloyds* in December 1838 and in Port Phillip in March 1839. He was honorary physician at the first Melbourne Hospital in Bourke Street in 1840, an inaugural member of the Port Phillip Medical Association and, in 1852, chairman of the Victorian Medical Association. He was an elder of the Presbyterian Church and, from 1858, a longtime member of the Victorian Legislative Council. Wilkie died in Paris.

William Byam Wilmot MD, LRCPS, LRCP (1805-71), served as surgeon superintendent on the *Coromandel*, arriving in Sydney in 1839. Wilmot first registered in NSW in 1840 then moved to Melbourne. He was Melbourne's first coroner and sat on the first Port Phillip Medical Board, retiring to England in 1863.

When the Port Phillip Medical Board was established in 1844, four of the petitioners, Drs Cussen, Howitt, Wilmot and Hobson, comprised the first board, with Cussen as president. The first list of registered practitioners in the district, published in January 1845, showed that twenty-one men had presented their papers to the board. This number increased slowly until in 1850 the number of registered practitioners stood at fifty-three. With the discovery of gold, immigration to the colony soared and registrations grew to seventy in 1851 and to 100 men by 1852. This influx brought men such as Richard Thomas Tracy, Thomas Shearman Ralph, James Robertson and James Edward Neild—men who would become leaders in the future university and clinical schools.

It remains puzzling why we find the earlier medical men, with qualifications from the finest universities and hospitals, practising within such a young colony, on the edge of a vast unsettled land, and so far from home. While personal factors may have prevailed, some acquaintance with the socio-economic factors and political climate in Great Britain might also help explain.

Without the right social connections or a hospital position where a newly qualified doctor might attract wealthy private patients, the decades leading up to the mid-nineteenth century were difficult years to set up in private practice. As a profession, medicine did not hold the status it does today and its past ties to a commercial world of competition and profit were not commensurate with the status of a gentleman. Depending on the patronage of the more affluent patients of the new middle classes, or an attachment to one of the many poorly paying provident or friendly societies meant a loss of autonomy irksome to a young man with energy and initiative.⁵

At this time Britain was experiencing considerable change in its economic and social class structure, caused by the industrial changes which led to the demise of farm and manual labour and their replacement by mechanisation. There was widespread concern, particularly towards the late 1830s and early 1840s, when poor harvests and falling wheat prices broke what had been a trade boom. This recession in England saw many thrown out of work, resulting in serious political unrest.⁶ For the unemployed or the struggling worker, emigration became the way to a better, independent life, offering just reward for labour, and a lessened fear of poverty. It is not apparent that any of Melbourne's pioneer doctors suffered this forced emigration, but the unstable economic conditions throughout Britain in the 1830s and '40s affected everyone, and may well have made a fresh start in a new land an appealing proposition.

It is probable that our early group of doctors brought with them their country's nineteenth century belief in progress and development and laissez-faire attitude towards the acquisition of wealth and reward by individuals prepared to work. The colony needed finance, population and 'industry' and Britain, keen to ease its burden of overcrowded cities, growing unemployment and political unrest, placed nothing in the way of those wishing to go.⁷ Once here these men took on official duties and corporate responsibilities within their profession as well as additional cultural, and community activities. Gradually they helped to

create the institutions and professional associations familiar at 'home'. Many of the petitioners came to the forefront again in 1846, as organisers of the Port Phillip Medical Association. Godfrey Howitt, in particular, was a member of the first University Council in 1853 and of the Medical School Committee in 1860, and fought alongside AC Brownless throughout the decade that saw the establishment of the Melbourne Medical School.

As assisted passages brought more people to the colony, and with the demographic changes brought about by the discovery of gold, the city would not look back. But the initial ground had been broken for these later arrivals by the efforts and confidence of the first colonial pioneers, among them the medical men who laid down the fundamental institutions and practices, the basis for the well-being of the future city and its inhabitants.

Ann Brothers
Curator, Medical History Museum

References

- 1 E Alan Mackay, writing in the *AMJ* Sept 1936 on 'Medical Practice during the Goldfields Era', states that he collected over forty names of medical men holding pastoral leases before Separation.
- 2 This document is currently on display in the Medical History Museum in the exhibition *Treating the Past – how Melbourne Medicine came of age*.
- 3 AW Shaw, *The History of the Port Phillip District: Victoria Before Separation*, Miegunyah Press, 1996, Ch.8. In March 1837 when Governor Bourke arrived from Sydney to inspect the settlement he found the population of the District had grown to '450 souls'. AJ Hopton, 'Rural Port Phillip, 1834 – 1851'. *Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings*, Vol XXXVI, Part V, 1950. The first census taken in 1838 revealed the presence of around 3500 people (3080 males and 431 females) in the District of Port Phillip, a figure which by the second census of 1841 had grown to 11 738, of whom 4479 were now at Melbourne. Melbourne was declared a town in 1842, and a city in 1847. Howard Boyd Graham, 'Happenings in the Now Long Past', *AMJ*, Vol II No.7 1952.
- 4 The problem of 'quacks' practising throughout the colony was not of course settled with this, nor with a subsequent Act passed in 1852 in the Victorian Parliament. The huge influx of immigrants seeking gold from 1851 drew with them large numbers of unqualified men who also sought to make their fortune on the goldfields. Registration did, however, prevent the unqualified from obtaining official or government positions, the avenue or first recourse for the newly arrived doctor, in need of immediate work.
- 5 M Jeanne Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London*. Uni of California Press, 1978.
- 6 Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement 1783 – 1867*, London, (1959) 1975, Ch.6.
- 7 Helen R Woolcock, *Rights of Passage – emigration to Australia in the Nineteenth century*, New York, 1986. Preface & Ch.1.

To His Excellency Sir George Gipps, Knight,
Captain General and Governor in Chief of the Territory of New South
Wales and Vice-Admiral of the same

The humble Petition of the undersigned Physicians, Surgeons, and Dispensary
Apothecaries, lawfully residing in the Town of Melbourne in the Colony of
**Treating the Past—how Melbourne
Medicine Came of Age**

is on display at the
Medical History Museum
Level 2, Brownless Biomedical Library,
The University of Melbourne

9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, until 27 August, 2004
Enquiries to Ann Brothers on telephone: (+61 3) 8344 5719