

Captain William Lonsdale 1799–1864

Police Magistrate, Port Phillip District Administrator prior to the arrival of La Trobe (1836-1839)

Sub-treasurer Colonial Treasury Melbourne (1840)

First Colonial Secretary Victoria (1851)

President of first Committee of Management of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution



*Portrait in the Australasian Pioneers' Club
Reproduced in Historical Records of
Victoria Foundation Series, vol. 3, p. 51*

This article focuses on the influences that shaped William Lonsdale's life prior to arrival in Australia, and on his role as President of the first Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee, established in 1839. It examines his relationship with Charles Joseph La Trobe, the Institution's first Patron, and with other members of the 1839 Committee.

Accounts of Lonsdale's time in Australia are dealt with in detail elsewhere, including a biography in the *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* by B.R. Penny,¹ also *The Life and Times of Captain William Lonsdale 1799–1864* by J.M.Wilkins,² Valuable documents, including letters, covering the years of Lonsdale's superintendence of Melbourne, 1836–1839, are published in *Historical Records of Victoria Foundation Series, Volume 3 The Early Development of Melbourne 1836-1839*.³ These are records kept by Lonsdale's pioneering administration of the first land sales and construction work in Melbourne.

Lonsdale was born into a military family

William, the first of James and Jane Lonsdale's children, was born on 21 October 1799, at Fort Den Helder, a northern seaport in the Low Countries of Holland. A contingent of James Lonsdale's Regiment—The King's Own—was deployed in the mid-1790s as an expeditionary force to attempt to restore the deposed Prince William of Orange. William had three brothers, Alured, James and Grenville, and a sister, Harriette. ⁴

¹ Penny, B.R. *Lonsdale, William (1799 – 1864)*, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition, Australian National University, 2006.

² Wilkins, J. M. *The Life and Times of Captain William Lonsdale 1799–1864*, self-published, Melbourne, 1991.

³ Historical Records of Victoria Foundation Series, Volume 3, *The Early Development of Melbourne 1836-1839* Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne 1984 Cannon, M. (ed.)

⁴ Wilkins J.M. op. cit. p. 5.

Military career – 1819-1837

On 8 July 1819, aged 19, Lonsdale received an Ensign's Commission in his father's old Regiment, The King's Own. His brother, Alured, followed him into service. In 1820, the brothers travelled to the West Indies to join their Regiment in Trinidad, subsequently serving in Barbados and Antigua. On 4 March 1824, Lonsdale was promoted to Lieutenant, and appointed Adjutant. In 1826, he was posted to Portugal with the same rank, and in 1828 returned to England, where he was based until 1830, when he took 6 months' leave, returning to his post in March 1831.⁵

In 1831 the Regiment was notified of a posting to New South Wales. In a recruitment drive, Lonsdale engaged in a number of "long marches" in Britain, covering 750 miles in three months. The Regiment's flotilla of ships left for Australia over a 17-month period between April 1831 and September 1832; Lonsdale supervised convicts on board the ship *Bussorah Merchant*, which sailed after nine months, arriving in Sydney on 7 November 1832.

In 1834 he was posted to Port Macquarie. In October of that year William purchased a captain's commission for around £1000.

"Like many of his fellow officers he also held civil office, first as assistant police magistrate [a salaried position], and from January 1836 as a justice of the peace."⁶ Lonsdale resigned from his regiment in March 1837, six months after arriving in Melbourne.

Marriage – 1835

On 6 April 1835, in Port Macquarie, he married Martha, the youngest daughter of Benjamin Smythe, civil engineer, of Launceston. Victoria's Mt Martha was named after Mrs Lonsdale.

The Lonsdales had seven surviving children; the first six born in Australia, and the youngest, Maude, in France after Lonsdale's retirement. They are: Alice Mary (20 February 1836); Liona Kingsown (8 July 1838); Edgar (26 November 1839); William (12 March 1843); Ethilda Wagstaff (16 July 1845); Rupert La Trobe (23 August 1849); Maude Smythe (3 July 1858). Liona Kingsown was named after Lonsdale's Regiment, and Rupert named after Charles Joseph La Trobe.⁷

A photograph of a grave in the Melbourne Cemetery showed that two further Lonsdale children died—at two months and five years respectively. The photograph is held by the

⁵ Ibid., p. 6-7.

⁶ Penny, B.R. op. cit.

⁷ Wilkins, J.M. op. cit. Various pp.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

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Royal Historical Society of Victoria.⁸ Ellen Peverel, the Lonsdales' fourth child was born on 26 January 1842, but survived only two months.⁹ On 27 September 1847, a seventh child, Ralph Peverel, was born. Ralph died aged four years and eight months on 23 May 1852. The children's headstone was inscribed "They will not return to us, by Thy grace, Oh Lord, we hope to go to them."¹⁰

La Trobe, in a letter to D.C. McArthur, dated 23 December 1860 reports "We just hear from poor Lonsdale that they have lost their fourth boy, Oswald. It seems that he never was what he ought to have been."¹¹ Oswald was the Lonsdale's last child—William was now 60, and Martha 47.¹²

Port Phillip District – 1836-1854.

Lonsdale, his wife, his daughter Alice, and servants arrived in Melbourne on the *Rattlesnake* on 29 September 1836, appointed by Governor Sir Richard Bourke to be the first Police Magistrate at Port Phillip. Lonsdale and family travelled up the river in a small boat to the new settlement. "The boat was tied up to the sloping riverbank and Lonsdale stepped ashore to be greeted by Dr Thomson ... wearing a formidable brace of pistols in his belt, who proceeded to tell Lonsdale... that they were 'in a most lawless state, with the possibility of being assaulted ...'"¹³ Thomson would be elected a Vice-President of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee. Another of the welcoming party was George Wintle, the first gaoler, who would also be an 1839 Committee member. Wintle had been a regimental drum-major of the 4th Regiment.¹⁴

Edmund Finn, in his *Chronicles of Early Melbourne* reports that Huddle, in his journal on March 1837, remarked "The weather-boarded building under Batman's Hill, was erected by Batman, and Capt Lonsdale stayed there until the two road parties' huts were joined together, and formed his dwelling. A tent at the rear of the huts was the dwelling of his cook, a fire in front his cook house."¹⁵

Lonsdale assumed the role of acting superintendent of the Port Phillip District until the appointment of Charles Joseph La Trobe as Superintendent in September 1839, after which Lonsdale continued in his role of police magistrate. The two men worked closely together in

⁸ Historical Records of Victoria Foundation Series, Volume 3 *The Early Development of Melbourne 1836–1839* p. 591.

⁹ Wilkins, J.M. op. cit. p. 127-129.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 147-148.

¹¹ Blake, L.J. (ed.) *Letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe* 1975, p. 57.

¹² Wilkins, J.M. op. cit., p. 164.

¹³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁵ Finn, E. *The Chronicles of early Melbourne* Heritage Publications, Melbourne, 1976, p. 33.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

the infant settlement, and would become founding Patron and President respectively of the newly-established Melbourne Mechanics' Institution just two months after La Trobe's arrival.

Finn wrote of Lonsdale “ ... On the 29th September, 1836, the first civil functionary and Government representative arrived in Melbourne in the "Rattlesnake" from Sydney. This was Captain William Lonsdale, attached to the 4th Regiment stationed at Sydney, where he passed over to the public service as Police Magistrate. He was to act as Administrator of the Government, under very explicit instructions from Head Quarters. His salary was £300 per annum, with £100 as outfit money; and he reigned here until the arrival of Mr Latrobe. He was an officer with much more good in him than harm, who acted strictly up to the letter of his orders; and, with a natural calmness of temperament and equanimity, took matters easily enough. A man of unblemished character, and impartial in the conduct of affairs, in a season of absolute political quietude, he succeeded in giving general satisfaction, and on resigning the reins of government received a testimonial and address from the inhabitants. ... He certainly was not overworked; and that the New South Welsh authorities seem to be aware of this, may be assumed from the fact of their forwarding him at the end of 1838, the following consignment of Government stores for the public service of Port Phillip:—6 bottles of red and 6 ditto, black ink, one bundle of quills, a box of wafers, 20 fathoms of red tape, and one quire of foolscap paper!”¹⁶

On 28 January 1840, following the arrival of the new Superintendent, Charles Joseph La Trobe, “Captain Lonsdale was presented with an address by the residents of Melbourne. About £350 was collected for the purchase of a silver service, which was selected in London by W.H.Yaldwyn [a Vice-President of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee], on behalf of the subscribers ... ”¹⁷ “By 1844, Lonsdale was referred to as ‘old captain Lonsdale’, and was associated with a past which seemed remote to those who knew only the prosperous and rapidly advancing colony of the 1850s.”¹⁸

Lonsdale left Australia on leave in July 1854; subsequently retiring on a pension. He died in London on 28 March 1864.

Lonsdale's relationship with La Trobe, Patron of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee

The relationship between La Trobe and Lonsdale was successful and long-lasting despite the difference in their backgrounds and experience. They were close in age: when La Trobe

¹⁶ Ibid., p.39-40.

¹⁷ Boys, R.D. *First Years at Port Phillip* 1959.

¹⁸ Penny, B.R. op. cit.

arrived in Melbourne in September 1839 aged 38, Lonsdale was nearing 40. They had both served in the West Indies: Lonsdale in 1820 with his Regiment, and La Trobe in 1837 on his Commission for the British Government.

But there were vast differences in their early lives. In view of his career in the British army, Lonsdale would have led a much more structured existence than that of La Trobe. Both men had travelled widely from their origins, but La Trobe travelled as an independent spirit, often on his own, in challenging territory. Lonsdale's life would have been bound by army regimes and the need to give and command unquestioning obedience.

Penny writes: "Lonsdale's relations with La Trobe were always good; indeed to his superiors he seemed reliable, conscientious and unpretentious. ... In August 1842 La Trobe appointed him acting Mayor of Melbourne until one could be elected under the new Corporation Act, and from October 1846 to February 1847, he acted as superintendent of Port Phillip while La Trobe was absent in Van Diemen's Land."¹⁹ La Trobe continued to nominate Lonsdale for appointments over the years, displaying a lasting confidence in him.

The relationship was placed in a difficult situation in 1843, when the trouble-making Judge Willis allegedly implied speculation and mis-use of Lonsdale's office as Sub-Treasurer to obtain priority in a transaction. "La Trobe was embarrassed at having the Resident Judge accuse one of his most senior officers of the Government, and probably one of the most upright members of the community, of what amounted to be a most serious offence. Because of their personal friendship this was doubly embarrassing to him ... " The Governor supported Lonsdale against judge Willis, who was removed from office.²⁰

Lonsdale named a son, born in Melbourne in 1849, Rupert La Trobe Lonsdale, indicating continuing loyalty and trust between Lonsdale and La Trobe.²¹

After both Lonsdale and La Trobe had returned to England in 1854, La Trobe in an undated letter to D.C.McArthur—who served as Auditor on the 1839 Committee—refers to Lonsdale in a tone suggesting a warm association: "... He came and spent two or three days with me afterwards to our great contentment—and is still in England preparing the home he has purchased near Southampton for the reception of his family in the Spring. ... He is in excellent health seemingly and as playful as a kitten with the children. You may imagine what a yarn we had about old times and friends."²²

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Wilkins, J.M., op. cit., pp. 134-136.

²¹ Ibid., p.175.

²² Blake, L.J.op. cit., p. 54.

Lonsdale's formal involvement as President of the Mechanics' Institution Committee

La Trobe and Lonsdale were not involved in everyday Committee business, and would have to a great extent distanced themselves, commanding respect in their roles as Patron and President, respectively. In their official capacities they were formally invited to significant events at the Mechanics' Institution. They were invited to the first lecture in April 1840, two of the Committee members being instructed to wait on "His Honor and Captⁿ Lonsdale" with the letter of invitation.²³ This would be the first of such occasions.

On 28 May 1840 members of the Committee were appointed to wait upon La Trobe and Lonsdale to solicit Subscriptions towards the erection of the proposed School of Arts and to solicit either of them to take the chair at the Annual General Meeting on 1st June. Lonsdale chaired this meeting—as he had chaired the meeting, over two dates, at which the first committee was established.

Lonsdale's community affiliations involving other members of the 1839 Committee

There were two important factors controlling Lonsdale's activities in the community: his formal role as acting superintendent and Police Magistrate, and his perceived position in the social hierarchy of early Melbourne.

Paul de Serville²⁴ considered a division of the men of pre-gold rush Melbourne into those of good society and those outside it. Within society "... three main groups stand out: gentlemen of good family, gentlemen by profession or commission, and gentlemen by upbringing." Outside 'good society' de Serville places "a man of substance and respectability: merchants, civil servants, professional men, squatters, landowners and others. As magistrates, town councillors, mayors, and parliamentarians they took part in the public life of the settlement." Members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee ranged across this divide.

Although not a 'gentleman from a titled family', Lonsdale would have been prominent in society as a 'gentleman by profession/commission', due to his army background and his official role in the Port Phillip District.²⁵ His official and social status are reflected in his affiliations which cover a wide range of organisations in early Melbourne, many of which also involved men who served on the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee.

A number of these involvements are listed below, chronologically, with members of the Mechanics' Institution Committee also listed []. Some of these commitments reflect

²³Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee of Management Minutes, April 13 1840.

²⁴ De Serville, P., *Port Phillip Gentlemen* 1980, p. 31-34.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 192-193.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

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Lonsdale's official status, such as duties as Patron, or on committees of 'Welcome' to dignitaries. Other associations reflect social and community interests such as banking, religious or club affairs.

In November 1838 Lonsdale was appointed a member of the Melbourne Club. [Yaldwyn, Smythe]²⁶ His appointment to the exclusive club confirms recognition of his 'gentleman' status.

A month later he was appointed as one of the first Trustees of the First Savings Bank. [Clow, Craig]²⁷

In February 1839 he was invited to be Patron of the Melbourne Union and Benefit Society.[Caulfield] Later in 1839 this society was involved in the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution.²⁸

Two official tasks in 1839 were formal committee duties: in April, a 'Welcome' to Lady Franklin, wife of the Governor of van Diemens Land [Simpson, Yaldwyn, Forbes, Clow], and in September, a 'Congratulatory Address' to La Trobe, on his arrival in Melbourne. [Welsh, F.McCrae]²⁹

Lonsdale became founding President of the Auxiliary Bible Society of Australia Felix in July 1840. [La Trobe (Patron), Clow, Brewster, Gardiner, Reeves, Wilkie, Peers, Thomson, Forbes]³⁰

In August 1840, Lonsdale became one of the three directors of the Union Bank of Australia. His fellow directors were W. Highett, Auditor of the 1839 Committee, and Committee member W.F.A. Rucker.³¹

Later that year, in December, Lonsdale was elected to the Committee of the Immigration Association established to introduce immigration to the Port Phillip District, independently of that to New South Wales in general. [La Trobe (Patron), Simpson, Yaldwyn, Welsh, Thomson, F.McCrae, Graham]³²

²⁶ Finn, E. op. cit., p. 417.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 326.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 662.

²⁹ De Serville, P. op. cit., pp. 211 & 212.

³⁰ Finn, E. op. cit., p. 177.

³¹ Ibid., p. 323.

³² Ibid., p. 492-493.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

As Police Magistrate, he was one of the magistrates appointed for the Port Phillip District for 1841. [La Trobe, Brewster, F.McCrae, Rankin, Simpson, T.Wills, Yaldwyn]³³

A major endeavour for Lonsdale and for many prominent citizens, including a number of early Mechanics' Institution Committee members, was the establishment of a hospital for Melbourne. Following some years of failure to obtain financial assistance from Governor Bourke—Lonsdale had first requested funding in early 1837—a provisional committee was set up to establish a hospital and "... to continue in office till the sum of £800 has been contributed for the building, with instructions to apply to the Government for a site for the Hospital ... and to take all of the steps necessary to the establishment of an Hospital."³⁴ [Brewster, A.McCrae, D.C.McArthur, Simpson, Welsh, T.Wills, Forbes]. Lonsdale continued to be involved over a long period of fundraising. In 1845 an executive was elected with La Trobe as President and Lonsdale as a Trustee [D.C.McArthur, Treasurer]. The first Committee of Management was elected in June 1847 with Lonsdale appointed as a Trustee. The first patients were admitted in March 1848.

However, not all the men who would be involved with the 1839 Committee were compliant with Lonsdale's authority. Official letters between Lonsdale and Governor Gipps³⁵ show that a dispute arose between Lonsdale and Russell, the Clerk of Works, in early 1839. Russell would be elected to the first Mechanics' Institution Committee in November that year. Lonsdale wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 15 January 1839: "I have had much cause for some time to complain of the little attention paid by the Clerk of Works, Mr Russell, to his duty."

Russell's initial instructions from the Colonial Secretary had made it clear that he was accountable to Lonsdale. " ... Owing to the distance of Port Phillip from Sydney and the difficulty of frequent communication, the Governor has thought it proper to give the Police Magistrate authority to act for the Government in certain cases and you will also attend Lonsdale, which will be your sufficient warrant—and you shall apply to him for advice and assistance in any case of doubtful difficulty or when anything is required by you out of the usual course of service."³⁶

Lonsdale, with his military background, would have expected observance of his authority. However, in May 1839 Lonsdale found it necessary to order Russell to give up his office; Russell refused to give up his office or to act as Clerk of Works, and was openly defiant.

³³ De Serville, P. op. cit., p. 211.

³⁴ Finn, E. op cit., p. 227-30.

³⁵ Historical Records of Victoria Foundation Series, Vol. 3 *The Early Development of Melbourne 1836-1839*, pp.201-207.

³⁶ Wilkins, J.M. op cit., p. 23.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

Lonsdale wrote to Governor Gipps on 14 May 1839 "I know not what was said to him on the subject of my former report respecting him, but his conduct has ever since been much worse, and on this occasion his behaviour has been so insolent, and in such a manner that I cannot explain. The transaction is the subject of conversation through the town and his defiance is known among the convicts, circumstances which might have so ill an effect that I may probably have done wrong in not suspending Mr Russell from his duty till I received your Excellency's instructions."

The Governor's Minutes, on June 1839 stated: "Let Mr Russell be immediately suspended." Russell eventually resigned in mid-June following a communication from Governor Gipps.³⁷ James Rattenbury, was appointed in his place as Clerk of Works, possibly a trifle awkward as he too was elected to the first Mechanics' Institution Committee

Other social and commercial connections with members of the 1839 Committee

With whom would Lonsdale have mixed socially? It is likely he would have found congenial company at the Melbourne Club, which was established by 'gentlemen' squatters in 1838, and included members W.H. Yaldwyn, and Captain G.B. Smythe, who were elected Vice-Presidents of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee.

"Captain and Mrs Lonsdale were very friendly with the Yaldwyns, particularly after they came to live in Melbourne. ... A party consisting of Capt and Mrs Lonsdale, Mr and Mrs Yaldwyn, Miss Bowles [Yaldwyn's sister-in-law and future wife of James Simpson] and Mr Simpson [who would assume the Presidency of the Mechanics' Institution for 10 years from 1841 following Lonsdale's resignation] attended at the beach on Saturday last, on a piscatorial excursion. ... and a copious supply of the finny tribe were taken."³⁸

In 1840, Yaldwyn stood bond for Lonsdale when he was made Colonial Sub-Treasurer. "It was necessary for senior government officers to supply bonds from men of standing as a guarantee or security of their integrity and William Yaldwyn was one of the two men who gave bonds for Lonsdale. The total bond was £4000, of which Yaldwyn put up £2000 and the other £2000 was paid by Capt Foster Fyans, Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Portland District. Lonsdale acknowledged this in writing " ... I hereby bind myself to pay for the said William Henry Young with any sum which may be demanded of him by the Government on account of the said Bond, or defalcation on my part in the performance of the conditions thereof."³⁹

³⁷ Historical Records of Victoria Foundation Series, op. cit., pp.201-207.

³⁸ Randell, J.O. *Yaldwyn of the Golden Spurs* 1980 pp. 58-59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
Captain William Lonsdale

Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

Yaldwyn was the one charged with the task of acquiring a silver service on behalf of the residents of Melbourne as an expression of gratitude to Lonsdale for his role prior to La Trobe's arrival.

Like many others, looking to supplement finances, Lonsdale purchased property, including 530 acres⁴⁰ managed by an 'overseer' – a 'run' " ... which had its head station near the bridge over the creek, where the township of Dandenong 'Big Hill' is at present situated. In 1839, Dr McCrae [a Vice-President in 1839 of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution] took over this station ... ".⁴¹

As a landowner Lonsdale would have discussed pastoral and labour issues with the early squatters. Similarly, he would have been interested in the activities of landowners within the Melbourne area. Skene Craig, a committee member of the 1839 committee had a vineyard in Collins Street, as did La Trobe in his Jolimont garden.⁴² He would have been interested in the agricultural activities of the early land owners in the Heidelberg area to the north of the city, involving a number of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee, including David Charteris McArthur, 'Melbourne's first banker', James Graham, Thomas Wills, George Porter, George Brunswick Smythe, and Robert Reeves.

Lonsdale had early developed a respect for James Simpson, who would follow Lonsdale as President of the Mechanics' Institution Committee for 10 years from 1841. In April 1837, Lonsdale commented to a friend in Sydney . "I have at last, I am glad to find, a colleague in the Magistracy, Mr Simpson, who is I believe a worthy man whose assistance and coagency will be a great help to me for I have hitherto had to battle with the rogues alone."⁴³

A close association existed between the Lonsdales and the La Trobe and McCrae families. Andrew McCrae was an initial Trustee of the Mechanics' Institution. His wife, Georgiana, wrote in her Journal for 9 September 1841 "With the boys to Jolimont to sit awhile with Mrs La Trobe who gave us cakes, and claret and water. Then called at Captain Lonsdale's, and, afterwards, crossed in the punt with two black fellows and a gin, to Sandy's [a son] great terror."⁴⁴

Georgiana painted miniatures of some of the Lonsdale children. She also offered to have the Lonsdale boys, Edgar and William, educated with the McCrae children who had a tutor.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Sullivan, M. *Men and Women of Port Phillip* Hale & Iremonger, 1985 p. 40.

⁴¹ McCrae, H., op. cit., p.63.

⁴² Ibid., p.103

⁴³ Wilkins, J.M. op. cit., p. 58.

⁴⁴ McCrae, H., op. cit., p. 43.

⁴⁵ Wilkins, J.M. op. cit., p. 141.

Significance of Lonsdale's association with the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution

Lonsdale's support for the Mechanics' Institution was important at a critical time. He lent authority to the negotiations to establish the Institution, by virtue of his official position as acting superintendent of the District; "with a natural calmness of temperament and equanimity"⁴⁶, he would have been a steady hand during the initial meetings to set up the Institution—the first of which he, as chairman, was obliged to adjourn, due to the confusion and conflicting opinions of the small number of attendees. He was again chairman when the meeting re-convened a few days later, this time—due to the publicity—with an attendance of 200, successfully steering the attendees in the formation of a Committee of Management. From then on, he would no longer be involved with the day-to-day management of the Institution, but as the initial President, with La Trobe as Patron, he was invited to important events and accepted the invitation to chair the important first Annual General Meeting of the Institution in June 1840. A steadying influence indeed among a diverse and opinionated group of early Melbournites.

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Anne Marsden, Athenaeum Archives, July 2011.

⁴⁶ Finn, E. op. cit., p. 39.