

## Dr Farquhar McCrae, M.D. 1807<sup>1</sup>–1850

*Assistant Surgeon 6<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, the Inniskillings*

*Pioneer grazier, businessman and doctor in the Port Phillip Settlement*

*Vice-President Mechanics' Institution 1839 Committee of Management*



*Farquhar McCrae, M.D.*  
*Portrait by Georgiana Huntly McCrae, 1837.*  
*Reproduced by kind permission of the*  
*Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.*

This article focuses on Farquhar McCrae's role as Vice-President of the first Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee of 1839, and on his relationship with fellow members of the Committee. A résumé is given of McCrae's life which is dealt with in detail elsewhere, including R.L. Pearce *Farquhar McCrae MD – Portrait of a Surgeon* Aust. N.Z. J. Surg. 1986, 56, 67-72.

### *Early life and career*

"Farquhar McCrae came from one of those Scottish families so hard to place: of middling rank; linked distantly with the aristocracy, the law, the church, officialdom; landed in a minor way."<sup>2</sup> He was the fifth child of William Gordon McCrae, and his wife, Margaret, née Morison. His siblings, who were also important in the history of the Port Phillip District were older siblings, Alexander and Andrew Murison (husband of Georgiana, a painter, and author of an important early Melbourne Journal), and younger sisters, Thomas Anne and Margaret Forbes. Two siblings who died before the McCrae family travelled to Australia were Agnes and John Murison.

McCrae received a classical education from a private tutor and at the University of Edinburgh. At 17 he was articled for a period of three years to a senior operating surgeon at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary and was awarded the degree MD of Edinburgh University in 1827. He declined an opportunity to remain as a lecturer in Anatomy in favour of furthering his medical education in Paris, where he spent two years gaining experience with leading surgeons. He then joined the British Army and was appointed curator of the Army Museum

at Chatham. Three years later, with his health impaired as a result of a dissecting injury, McCrae was offered a regimental appointment with the 6<sup>th</sup> Dragoons. He was commissioned as an Assistant Surgeon on 28 September 1832 and served with them for three years. Bad health continued, leading to McCrae leaving the Regiment, deciding to seek a warmer climate.<sup>3</sup>

### *Life in Australia*

Georgiana McCrae, in a Supplement to her Journal, wrote "In March 1839 Dr Farquhar McCrae, his wife (Agnes Morison) and child, Mrs McCrae [his widowed mother], Miss Thomas, Aunt Margaret, and servant sailed from Leith per *Midlothian* for Port Phillip and Sydney. On arriving at Port Philip the doctor determined to stay there ...<sup>4</sup> Farquhar McCrae's family lived initially at Great Bourke Street West where McCrae established his medical practice. The following year he went into partnership with Dr David John Thomas, who had trained at Swansea Infirmary and the University College Hospital, London, and who had arrived in Melbourne in January 1839. Thomas would be appointed the first surgeon of the Melbourne Hospital following its opening in 1848. The entry for Dr Thomas in the Australian Dictionary of Biography describes him as "A small man of endless energy and good humour, partial to a good dinner and a convivial gathering, but no less afraid of controversy ... " - no doubt a welcome addition to the McCrae family when, in December 1840, he married Margaret Forbes McCrae, Farquhar's youngest sister.

In March 1841 McCrae was still living in Great Bourke Street West when his sister-in-law, Georgiana and family went straight to his house on 4<sup>th</sup> March following their arrival from England.<sup>5</sup>

From the start McCrae was making significant land purchases. On 1 August 1839, just a few months after his arrival in Melbourne, he bought land in the Parish of Jika Jika: Portions 24 and 47, of 25 and 27 acres, for £600 and £432 respectively. [Other 1839 Mechanics' Institution committee members purchasing land on that day were Yaldwyn and Highett]. Later in the year, on 3 October, McCrae purchased further land in the Parish: Portions 126 and 133, of

315 and 323 acres, for £834 15 0 and £1227 8 0 respectively. [Wills, Reeves, Highett, Welsh, Lonsdale].<sup>6</sup> Melbourne's Moreland City Council records: "Dr Farquhar McCrae was an extremely wealthy surgeon who purchased 600 acres in the area which he called Moreland."

In 1841 he bought land in Moreland called 'La Rose' on which he started building a house. By 1842 Kerr's *Melbourne Almanac and Port Phillip Directory* lists: Farquhar McCrae, J.P., La Rose, Moonee Moonee Ponds, Melbourne. The land formed part of McCrae's Moreland Estate which was named after his father's plantation in Jamaica. The house, now known as Wentworth House, is at 22 Le Cateau Street, Pascoe Vale South and is listed as number HO 138 with the Victorian Heritage Register. Construction started in 1841 of this single story basalt house with gabled slate roof, designed in a simple pre-separation Colonial Georgian style. It consisted of three main rooms, one on one side and two on the other side of a central hall, with a kitchen attached at the rear.<sup>7</sup> The house built on La Rose ... (although it has been added to over the years) is the oldest known private dwelling in Victoria still standing on its original site and the fifth oldest building in Victoria.



*Wentworth House (originally La Rose) Le Cateau St, Pascoe Vale  
The central portion was built by Dr Farquhar McCrae in 1841-42.  
Victorian Heritage Register HO 138.*

*The oldest known private dwelling in Victoria still on original site.  
Photograph courtesy of [www.onmydoorstep.com.au](http://www.onmydoorstep.com.au)*

In 1839, McCrae acquired two stations near Big Hill [Dandenong]<sup>8</sup> which were transferred from Captain Lonsdale.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that he over-extended himself financially with his land acquisition, leaving himself vulnerable to the Port Phillip depression of the early 1840s.

McCrae retained one of his two pastoral stations for some years, but his sale of the second “Eumemmering” property led to an ongoing dispute and legal action. J. L. Foster, the purchaser “ ... was not satisfied with his purchase and refused to pay the full price. ... on 1 December 1843, Foster intercepted McCrae riding up Queen Street and hammered both horse and man so fiercely that McCrae became unseated. ... The doctor made a claim in court for damages amounting to £2000 but eventually had to settle for £250. James Simpson, who was at the time the President of the Mechanics’ Institution, supported McCrae during the controversy with Foster.<sup>10</sup>

“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 ... 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 also 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 ... because it presented a field so much larger than that of Melbourne.”<sup>11</sup>

McCrae learned at this time that his name had never been removed from the Army List so he could still be eligible for an appointment to the Regiment. “He talks of going to London, should he not succeed in building up a practice at Sydney.”<sup>12</sup> “Throughout the latter part of 1844 he seriously considered this alternative if attempts to establish a practice in Sydney proved unsuccessful.”<sup>13</sup> He was indeed having problems - in August 1844 he reported to his brother, Alexander, that he had only taken 11 guineas since he arrived in Sydney in December, 1843, and that he was unable to pay him the money he owed.<sup>14</sup>

His financial problems were compounded when he became embroiled with William Bland, a fellow surgeon in Sydney; they had disagreed about the treatment of a patient and this spilled over into an exchange of correspondence in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, resulting in damage to the reputations of both men. Russell gives a detailed account of this sorry affair which “ ... exacerbated McCrae’s growing isolation from his professional community ... and underlined his total and humiliating defeat.”<sup>15</sup>

After an appointment with the Sydney Dispensary and Infirmary was terminated at the end of 1846 McCrae continued in private practice from Castlereagh Street. His health continued to deteriorate and he died in April 1850, aged 43. He is buried in Melbourne's Fawkner cemetery next to the grave of John Batman.<sup>16</sup> His wife Agnes returned with her children to Britain and in September 1854 she died in London, of cholera.<sup>17</sup>

In 1848, during McCrae's time in Sydney, safe chloroform anaesthesia was introduced which would have been a great boon to surgeons such as McCrae, although he is not generally recognised 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 modern monaural stethoscope ... demonstrated ... during McCrae's visit to Paris.”<sup>18</sup>.

Georgiana McCrae, later in life, in a supplement to her Journal, wrote of her brother-in-law Farquhar “ ... he invested £5000 when he went to practice his profession in Sydney; after a few years, however, he was enabled to redeem his property from his bank. He died in 1851[sic], and, when his youngest child came of age and the various properties were sold, the amount realised £52,000, exclusive of the rental of the house owing all the foregone years.”<sup>19</sup> Possibly this referred to the Moreland property as the Victorian Heritage website states that whilst McCrae was living in Sydney, La Rose was leased and farmed by Coiler Robertson, who purchased it in 1852 after McCrae’s death.

### *Farquhar McCrae as a member of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution 1839*

#### *Committee*

McCrae was elected as Vice-President of the Committee of Management on 12 November 1839. Committee Minutes indicate that he was the only one of the eight Vice-Presidents of the 1839 Committee who attended after the first two meetings.<sup>20</sup> On 26 November 1839 McCrae was involved in the preparation of draft laws for the Institution's regulation, and in March 1840 he was approached to give a lecture.

At the first Annual General Meeting of the Institution on 1 June 1840 McCrae was re-elected as one of two Vice-Presidents [with Rev James Clow]. Also elected to the 1840 committee was Farquhar's brother Andrew McCrae (husband of Georgiana McCrae). Farquhar McCrae wrote to the Committee thanking them for his re-election as Vice-President, subscribing £10, also £20 towards the proposed Mechanics' School of Arts.

It is interesting to look at the attendance of Farquhar and Andrew McCrae in the light of what was happening at the Institution during this period. Things were on the move following a decision on 6 August 1840 to request the Secretary to endeavour to purchase two lots at an ensuing Government land sale - the Institution urgently required a home. Andrew McCrae was heavily involved in discussions concerning land buying and selling.<sup>21</sup> He attended regularly, chairing a number of meetings between 4 June and 17 September 1840, during which period Farquhar McCrae was not recorded as attending.

Towards the end of that year, when plans and specifications were invited for the building, Andrew McCrae was appointed to a sub-committee to decide on design requirements. It was at this stage that Farquhar McCrae reappeared, chairing 7 of the 12 meetings between 22 December 1840 and 7 June 1841 at which building plans were "minutely examined". Andrew was present at some of these meetings.

What was happening in Farquhar McCrae's life at this time that would have influenced his attendance at the Institution's committee meetings?

His pastoral interests, which would have taken him out Melbourne, would surely at times have had an impact on his work as a surgeon as well as his capacity to attend meetings of the Mechanics' Institution and other organisations. It has been suggested that at this time a number of doctors, including McCrae, became squatters and virtually abandoned their profession.<sup>22</sup> McCrae's pastoral obligations might have been part of the reason for his non-attendance at meetings between June and September 1840, following the June Annual General Meeting at which he had been re-elected as a Vice-President. Although he chaired some meetings between December 1840 and June 1841, he attended rarely after this. As will be seen, at this time he was a Magistrate, a director of a number of organisations including a bank, a committed and busy member of the Church of England, as well as involved in efforts to establish a hospital for Melbourne. Details of his associations given below indicate his heavy involvement in the affairs of the Port Phillip community.

### *McCrae's associations which involved members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee*

[ ] indicates fellow members of the 1839 committee.

There was a groundswell of enthusiasm among the influential members of Melbourne society particularly in the early 1840s to be involved in the many enterprises starting up, but alas, many of which withered on the vine from the lack of will or time on the part of members to see them through to fruition. McCrae, like many fellow members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee, became involved in a number of organisations and he must have crossed paths with fellow members on many occasions, on behalf of many causes - many altruistic, but some undoubtedly involving self-interest.

He became a Director in late 1839 of the Port Phillip Bank. [Gardiner, Wills, Craig, Welsh; defeated candidates included Gisborne and Smythe]. Finn remarks "Great results were anticipated from this venture, but never realised. ... 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."<sup>23</sup>

The following year, in January 1840, McCrae was elected Vice-President of the Pastoral and Agricultural Society. [Clow, Smythe, Simpson, Rucker, Welsh, Andrew McCrae]. The first show took place in March 1842 and was a failure, exhibits being disappointing as resources in the district were not yet up to the expected standard.<sup>24</sup>

April 1840 brought a rush of new commitments. McCrae was a Justice of the annual Licensing session which increased the town's licences by 13 to 31. [Simpson, Brewster].<sup>25</sup> In the same month he became a founding Director of the Melbourne Auction Company whose objective was to improve the prospects of landholders with property to dispose of. [Wills, Graham, Smythe, Highett]. " ... It soon shared the fate of several other old joint-stock undertakings which starting with a Directory of ostentatious names, and less capital and expectations, very soon came to grief."<sup>26</sup> Also in April 1840 McCrae was on the committee of the Melbourne Bridge Company, which was established to erect a bridge across the Yarra River at Elizabeth Street. [Mayne, Sutherland, Peers, D.G. McArthur]. The business dragged on until long after McCrae had left Melbourne for Sydney.<sup>27</sup>

In May 1840 McCrae was busy addressing the first Separation meeting [Gisborne, Welsh] at which a petition to the Imperial Parliament was prepared. Again, little was accomplished in the early years while McCrae was still in the Port Phillip District.<sup>28</sup>

McCrae was part of a strong official staff group within the Church of England. [La Trobe, D.C. McArthur].<sup>29</sup> Towards the end of 1840 he was appointed to the building committee of St James Church. [D.C. McArthur, Porter; Beaver was the builder].<sup>30</sup>

He was a member of the Immigration Association, formed in December 1840 for the introduction of immigrants exclusively to Port Phillip rather than to New South Wales generally. [La Trobe (Patron), Simpson, Yaldwyn, Wills, Lonsdale, Welsh, Graham]. "This



Association does not appear to have effected much good directly, possibly through the absence of concerted and continuous exertion."<sup>31</sup>

January 1841 saw McCrae elected to the Market Commission. " ... the first legally constituted electoral body in Port Phillip ... " formed to set up properly established markets. [Simpson, Porter, Peers].<sup>32</sup>

McCrae was caught up in the busy social life of the Melbourne elite. "The gentlemen colonists wished to enjoy all the amenities of English social life and a group organised Assemblies in 1841." When the first Assembly was held McCrae was a steward. [Simpson].<sup>33</sup>

A public meeting was held on 1 March 1841 to discuss the establishment of a much needed public hospital for Melbourne. The following resolution was moved by 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." [Simpson, Welsh, Forbes, Wills]. It was resolved " ... that subscriptions be immediately opened at the banks to raise funds for the erection of an hospital, and that the following gentlemen be appointed as a Provisional Committee ... to continue in office till the sum of £800 has been contributed for the building ... " [McCrae was not part of this committee, but his brother Andrew was elected, together with Brewster, Lonsdale, D.C. McArthur, Welsh, Wills, Forbes].<sup>34</sup> The hospital was eventually opened in March 1848, by which time McCrae had been in Sydney for several years.

In October 1843 the first Protection meeting, originated with the agriculturalists, was held for the protection of local industry. Farquhar McCrae presided. [Highett]. "The committee subsequently did, or pretended to do, a good deal of work in the matter but beyond the transmission of the petition to Sydney, nothing further was for a long time heard of what was then considered by the majority of the colonists to be something not far removed from a chimerical craze."<sup>35</sup>

Late in 1843, McCrae was elected to the first nominated Council in Bourke. [Simpson, Wills]. The council had extensive powers in relation to buildings and infrastructure, but " ... the Council seemed to be afraid of its responsibilities, and proceeded very slowly and hesitatingly ... It was unpopular, both in town and country."<sup>36</sup>

McCrae was obviously a man of means when he arrived in the fledgeling settlement and was possessed of considerable enthusiasm and energy, as were many of his fellow 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee members. Had it not been for the depression of the early 1840s he no doubt would have increased his wealth, and his standing in the medical fraternity, and escaped some of the pressures that contributed to his early death.

Finn, in a rather curious comment regarding Farquhar McCrae in relation to the situation of the government doctor in early Melbourne writes: "The billet, though warm enough in some respects, had ever a tendency to get too hot. It was hot water with Cussen, it reached boiling heat with Sullivan [both early government doctors], and Dr McCrae can best tell whether it was frying-pan or fire with him. ... yet McCrae had the cat-like tenacity of nine lives, for though he never fattened, he actually seem to thrive on what killed others. In this respect, he was a living illustration of the adage that one man's poison is another man's meat."<sup>37</sup>

Although Finn was writing about these early events later in his life, he would have known these doctors through his work as a journalist in early Melbourne; his comment on Farquhar McCrae perhaps tells us much about this talented but ill-fated man.

---

<sup>1</sup> McCrae, Hugh, *Georgiana's Journal Melbourne 1841-1865* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1966, p.39. Georgiana records on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1841: "Dr McCrae completes his thirty-fifth year."

<sup>2</sup> De Serville, Paul, *Port Phillip Gentlemen*, Oxford university Press, 1980, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Pearce, R.L. *Farquhar McCrae MD – portrait of a Surgeon* Aust.N.Z. J.Surg. 1986, 56, pp. 67-68.

<sup>4</sup> McCrae, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> McCrae, p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Cannon, Michael, ed., *Historical records of Victoria, Foundation Series*, vol. 6 , *The crown, the land and the squatter 1835-1840*, Melbourne, Government Printing Office, 1984, pp. 402-407.

<sup>7</sup> Victorian Heritage Database: <http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/places/heritage>.

<sup>8</sup> McCrae, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Bride, Thomas, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers* Lloyd O'Neil, Melbourne, 1983. P. 106.

<sup>10</sup> de Serville, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Pearce, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> McCrae, p.146.

<sup>13</sup> Pearce, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Pearce, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, Penny, *Savage or civilised? manners in colonial Australia*, Sydney, New South Books, 2010, pp. 171-187.

<sup>16</sup> Pearce, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Russell, p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> Pearce, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> McCrae, p.4.

<sup>20</sup> *Minutes* of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee of Management, Athenaeum Library Archives.

<sup>21</sup> *Minutes* Melbourne Mechanics' Institution 31 August 1840.

<sup>22</sup> Inglis, Ken S. *Hospital and Community – A History of the Royal Melbourne Hospital*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1958. P. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Pearce, p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Finn, E. *The chronicles of early Melbourne 1835 – 1852*, Melbourne, Fergusson & Mitchell, 1888, pp. 427-428.

<sup>25</sup> Finn, p. 548.

<sup>26</sup> Finn, p. 596.

<sup>27</sup> Finn, p. 500.

<sup>28</sup> Finn, p. 906.

<sup>29</sup> Finn, pp. 122-123.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, Hilary, *A history of St James Old Cathedral Melbourne*, Melbourne, Rowprint, 2nd edition 1993, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Finn, pp. 492-493.

<sup>32</sup> Finn, pp. 253-255.

<sup>33</sup> de Serville, p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> Finn, pp. 227-230

<sup>35</sup> Finn, pp. 663-664.

<sup>36</sup> Finn, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> Finn, p. 49.

**Anne Marsden, Athenaeum Archives, August 2011.**