

Gentlemen Versus Players

Public squabbling over membership of the foundation committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution

*At the establishment of every similar institution it almost invariably happens that little incidents occur calculated to mar the harmony ...*¹

Early moves to establish a mechanics' institution – and some skulduggery.

To step from Collins Street into the Melbourne Athenaeum Library is to be enveloped in a rich past, dating back to the early days of the Library's forerunner, the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution. But establishing the first such organisation in Port Phillip, later to become the colony of Victoria, was to prove a fractious undertaking. The lines quoted above are diplomatically couched but refer to acrimonious early conflict. Teasing out the strands of discord reveals provincial politics and social power struggles in the Melbourne of the late 1830s.

Mechanics' institutes had been established in Britain from the early 1800s to offer education in technical subjects to mechanics. In literature relating to the Industrial Revolution the word 'mechanic' appears synonymous with artisan, craftsman, manual worker and machine operative. However, studies of British institutes indicate a general failure to achieve the aim of catering for the working man, instead appealing more to the middle classes.²

When giving a lecture at the 1861 inauguration of the School of Arts in Wollongong, New South Wales, John Woolley, a leading promoter of adult education looked back on the establishment of mechanics' institutes in Australia. He commented that there had been a need for a different approach in such institutions in Australia:

Our wants are not those of England thirty years ago: we require not only skills in a section of our people, but education for all; not mere art-culture but preparation for the general duties of society ... The colonist ... must think and act for himself. Nothing is so striking to a European as the handiness of those in the bush; their fertility of resource, and self-dependence.³

In an address of welcome given by the Melbourne Union Benefit Society in October 1839 to the new Superintendent, Charles Joseph La Trobe, the Union's master builders asserted the importance of trades in the rapidly growing community. Since the first weatherboard house was erected on the Yarra River four years previously there were now three hundred and

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eighty-five houses, five churches, and various manufacturers and trades 'whose labours it may be confidently asserted have accomplished more for this little place than any other class of its mingled community'.⁴ Skilled labour in the settlement was scarce. Whilst as yet there was little manufacturing requiring machine operatives, there was increasing activity on the building scene. George Arden in an editorial in the *Port Phillip Gazette* that year laments the lack of good tradesmen: 'Artisans, of whatever denomination, in this part of the world, must be either thoroughly idle, or irreclaimable drunkards not to prosper.'⁵

It was reported in an editorial in the *Port Phillip Gazette* of 28 September 1839 that 'the Mechanics of Melbourne, who now form a large and respectable proportion of the community, are desirous of forming a Mechanics' Institution. The library, the aid of which in that of Sydney and Van Diemen's Land has proved so valuable an accompaniment, can, it is considered, by subscriptions and donations be made sufficiently copious to answer the ends of self-improvement to its members.' A meeting would be held 'at the Builders Arms ... on an early opportunity.'

On October 4 1839 the master builders of Melbourne proposed:

That a Mechanics' Institution be formed in Melbourne for the promotion of science in this rising colony, particularly amongst the young, as well as the operative classes.⁶

However, their initiative came close to being hijacked by a powerful social elite. A meeting called to discuss forming a mechanics' institution, chaired by Captain William Lonsdale, had only a small number of attendees, as many Melburnians, some claimed, were more interested in seeing the town fireworks on Guy Fawkes night.⁷ But according to the diary of Rev. William Waterfield, the first Minister of the Independent Congregational Church in Melbourne 'after the passing of one or two resolutions, the whole was a scene of confusion, through the interference of Mr Arden, who displayed any other spirit than that of a gentleman. I was quite surprised for I did not expect it from him.'⁸



*Rev. William Waterfield
Royal Historical Society of Victoria.*

Apparently the trade employers and their workers had an ally on their side in George Arden, the young and brash proprietor of the *Port Phillip Gazette*.

John Pascoe Fawkner in his *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser* reported that:

A meeting was held... to form a Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts. Some resolutions were prepared, a Committee named, and a Subscription list commenced. ... The business is taken up with much vigour and spirit by the mechanics, and appears so likely to be well-supported by the monied interest, that nothing can cause its failure – except some disappointed maniac should sow discord, where now is concord and co-operation.⁹

It is most likely that George Arden was Fawkner's 'maniac'.

Arden, in the *Port Phillip Gazette* explained that he had objected to the 'ready-made list' of the committee nominees because the members themselves should decide by 'a free and open election'. He added: 'after a long *discussion*, which some parties, (who we are sorry to observe, are more bent on evil than good), distorted into *disunion*, our amendment was carried by a fair majority.'¹⁰

In a later issue of the *Gazette* Arden further explained:

We owe to ourselves a word in vindication of the conduct pursued by us upon the former occasion. ... There was, we believe, a preliminary general meeting held the previous night ... Of this convention however only a few hours' notice had been given, and its whereabouts was studiously suppressed. ... The preparatory committee who were named drew up a list ... which was perfectly ridiculous ... Of the twenty-four only eight were mechanics, and of the remaining sixteen, eight could not have been worse chosen.¹¹

So, who was involved in the 'secret' preliminary meeting? Marc Askew, in 1992, wrote:

Fawkner had nominated a group of his friends and supporters for membership of the provisional committee ... The artisans of the Union Benefit Society had invited financial support from the well-to-do of the town, but it is unlikely that they expected to have their project undermined and taken over by Melbourne's leading political factions.¹²

However, no direct evidence has yet been sighted to confirm Fawkner's role in the preliminary meeting. Askew, in an earlier 1982 work, considered that 'this group may well have been organised by J.P. Fawkner', referring to a 1955 thesis by Jill Lundie which states: 'George Arden had attacked the "secret conference" with which apparently John Pascoe Fawkner had some connection ...'. Neither confirms Fawkner's direct involvement.¹³

Neither did Arden name Fawkner directly in an editorial in the *Port Phillip Gazette*:

It was said, by those whose names were entered [put forward at the preliminary meeting] that we disputed their appointment with a view of bringing ourselves into collision with PERSONS ... our sole reason was a desire of supporting an abstract principle ... that officers must be nominated by the members.¹⁴

The meeting to form a mechanics' institution was reconvened on 12 November. On this occasion the assistant secretary, Mr W Morrisson, turned the minutes book upside down, entering the night's minutes at the other end from those of the previous week, perhaps seeking a fresh start after the initial conflict.

The sniping from opposing editorial rooms continued. Fawkner reported in the *Patriot*:

The [reconvened] meeting to form a Mechanics' Society, or Institute, took place on Tuesday last and sundry resolutions were passed; but it was plain to be seen (from the absence of the monied and influential persons, who, on the preceding Tuesday, gave their free support, until a fractious adventurer marred the harmony of the meeting), that the Institution had lost a great and powerful support. The Vandal, we hear, boasts that his machinations have ruined this Institution. Can any man, said to be of letters, boast that he has retarded the progress of knowledge. We pity such a wretch, and look with contempt upon his febleness and folly.¹⁵

This presumably referred to Arden, already a 'maniac' and now a 'vandal'.

In the *Gazette* Arden reported on the reconvened meeting: 'Upwards of 200 persons were present, and the important act of nominating its officers was passed without opposition. To

effect this desirable object a meeting had been called, consisting entirely of mechanics.’¹⁶

We hear again from our reliable diarist, Waterfield who wrote after the reconvened meeting, suggesting another fiery episode: ‘In remarks which were made the ministers of religion were treated with anything but respect’.¹⁷

A week later a writer to the *Patriot* protested:

Sir – in looking over the Proceedings of the Mechanic’s Institute, I see very strong symptoms of disease. I perceive that the Polemical Divinity, and the Clergy of the English Churches [*possibly referring to Fawkner’s close supporter Congregationalist, William Waterfield*], are equally shut out. And both the Gentlemen of the Scotch Church [*Presbyterians Rev. James Clow and Rev. James Forbes*] are placed in office. Now Sir, do you think this right? If you do, the Public declare you are out of your latitude – so farewell to the Institute, and goodbye to you. ‘O.P.Q.’¹⁸

Was this the start of the Melbourne-Sydney rivalry?

Whether or not Fawkner instigated the preliminary meeting, it appears that he continued to make trouble for the fledgling institution. Fawkner turned his enmity towards the Sydneysiders, some of whom were involved in the establishment of the Mechanics’ Institution, and whom he regarded as threatening his prominence in Melbourne’s affairs. In his 1985 biography of Fawkner, Cecil Billot comments: ‘To him the Vandemonians ... were the genuine Port Phillipians; those from Sydney ... were but greedy intruders out to profit from the enterprise and foresight and hard work of the true pioneers.’¹⁹



*John Pascoe Fawkner: photographer Thomas Foster Chuck.
1872 Mosaic: The Explorers and Early Colonists of Victoria
State Library of Victoria H5056/3.*

T.L.Work, writing in 1897 on the early Victorian press describes the 'fine slang-whanging mill' between the Vandemonian 'T'othersiders' and the 'Sydney-siders'. He refers to Fawkner giving Arden 'hot coffee' on every occasion, and to Arden's comment that 'the Vandemonian cur is yelping at us again'.²⁰

Fawkner, son of a transported convict, and almost 30 years older than Arden, would most likely have been affronted by opposition from this young Sydneyite, proud of his aristocratic background, who at a mere 18 years of age in 1838 had launched the *Port Phillip Gazette* with Thomas Strode. Arden acknowledged that he was known as the '*Boy Editor of the Gazette*'.²¹

In an *Introductory Lecture* to the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution in April 1840, Rev. Thomas Osborne, a retired Presbyterian Minister, gave his views on the 'pleasures and advantages' of such an institute. Was his aim to pour oil on the troubled waters of the recent conflict?

Although in our worldly intercourse with each other little jealousies ... and petty dissensions will arise, when we meet on such occasions the mind begins to reflect and perhaps to discover that some blame belonged to self; that all should not have been placed to the debit of him with whom we disagreed.²²

The committee's Report to the first Annual General Meeting in June 1840 mentions early unrest:

At the establishment of every similar institution it almost invariably happens that little incidents occur calculated to mar the harmony ... and that the grand object which all desired to promote is for a time lost sight of amongst the number of different opinions advanced and in the warmth of debate to which they give rise. Anxious, therefore, to draw a veil over the unpleasant past, your Committee have the pleasure of announcing that the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution is at present in a most flourishing state and that there are the most cheering prospects to encourage its friends to future exertion.²³



Robert Russell, artist 'Melbourne from the Mechanics' Inst.'
Melbourne from Collins Street East, looking west, the Yarra River to the left.
Mechanics' Institute on far right. State Library of Victoria H38114.
On verso is note in artist's hand saying exact copy of painting done in 1844.

But the future would not be easy. If we are to believe the word of Arden's partner, printer Thomas Strode, Fawkner's ongoing enmity contributed to the 'little incidents'. Strode's reminiscences of the Melbourne of 1839 – 1841 were written nearly 30 years later and remained unpublished, possibly because his outspoken views and hostility towards Fawkner might have attracted libel suits. Strode himself commented that 'in fact the remarks were written and intended to be published before his death, therefore we see no just reason why the manuscript should now [after Fawkner's death] be altered'.²⁴

In October 1838 when Arden and Strode established the *Port Phillip Gazette*, the first authorised Port Phillip newspaper, Fawkner had already been instructed to cease publication of his *Melbourne Advertiser* pending the granting of a licence.²⁵ In the *Gazette* of 29 January 1840, Arden declared 'That we put forth a just claim to the honour of having been the first journalist in Melbourne will not require three lines of argument. The Paper which has hitherto pirated the position issued only two or three unreadable numbers of a publication which was suppressed as illegal.'²⁶ When one looks at the beautifully handwritten issues of Fawkner's early newspaper it is easy to disagree with Arden's biased account. In late January 1839 Fawkner sent out a circular announcing his intention to publish his paper, and in April

1839 he was able to restart his now authorised newspaper, renamed the *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser*.²⁷

Strode alleged that he had encountered obstructions in the production of the early numbers of the *Gazette* including the time a compositor downed tools for some weeks, according to Strode at the behest of Fawkner.²⁸ There was a desperate shortage of labour and employers boarded incoming ships to engage workmen. 'Mr Strode had been successful one day in getting a man, and had agreed as to wages, and he was well pleased; but the man never turned up, and Mr Strode subsequently learned that Fawkner had also visited the ship, interviewed the printer, and offered him higher wages, and so secured his services.'²⁹ A slightly desperate advertisement in Arden and Strode's *Gazette* of 28 September 1839 for two compositors, at sixty shillings per week, and steerage passage from Van Diemen's Land or Sydney, declared sternly 'Persons in the habit of working one week and DRUNK the next, need not apply.'



*Thomas Strode, photographer Thomas Foster Chuck.
1872 Mosaic: The Explorers and Early Colonists of Victoria
State Library of Victoria H5056/70.*

Billot considered that Strode may have painted a rather jaundiced view of Fawkner: 'When considering any opinion of Fawkner recorded by Thomas Strode, it must be remembered that the Sydney gentleman harboured hatred for the little publican which deepened with the years.'³⁰

Strode wrote that following the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution:

Dissensions, jealousies, and ill-will, soon entered the camp; the gentlemen who composed but a small portion of the Committee endeavoured to override the four-fifths of that body who were mechanics – to divert the Institution from

its original purpose, and appropriate it to their own special use. The feud ... was fostered and abetted by the spleen of a 'peculiar little old man' [Strode did not name Fawkner directly in his reminiscences] who was sorely annoyed at the Institution being established without his aid or even being consulted in the matter, and he was the more enraged that the project should have emanated from mechanics – members of the Union Benefit Society – many of whom had previously belonged to the school of arts at Sydney, which latter fact was sufficient to rouse the ire of this bellicose individual and induce him to form a clique for the total destruction of the Mechanics' Institution particularly, and the extermination of all Sydneyites especially, from the face of Port Phillip.

He added:

Mr Gisborne [a founding vice-president] ... aided by the powerful pen of Mr George Arden, in the *Gazette* newspaper, together with the moral courage displayed by Messrs Peers, Caulfield, Strode, and one or two others, who were on the Committee ... disconcerted the plans of the belligerents; their party and champion were completely routed and retired from the combat crestfallen, and if not better, no doubt, wiser men.³¹

It is worth noting that Arden and Strode printed in June 1840 the first Annual Report of the Institution, apparently having 'seen off' rival printer Fawkner.

The founding committee

The 1839 committee, listed in the Appendix, appears extraordinarily cumbersome and top-heavy. Charles Joseph La Trobe, recently arrived to take up the position of Superintendent of Port Phillip, was appointed patron. Captain William Lonsdale, elected as president, was joined by eight vice-presidents, eight office-bearers and thirty-two committee members - no fewer than fifty men.

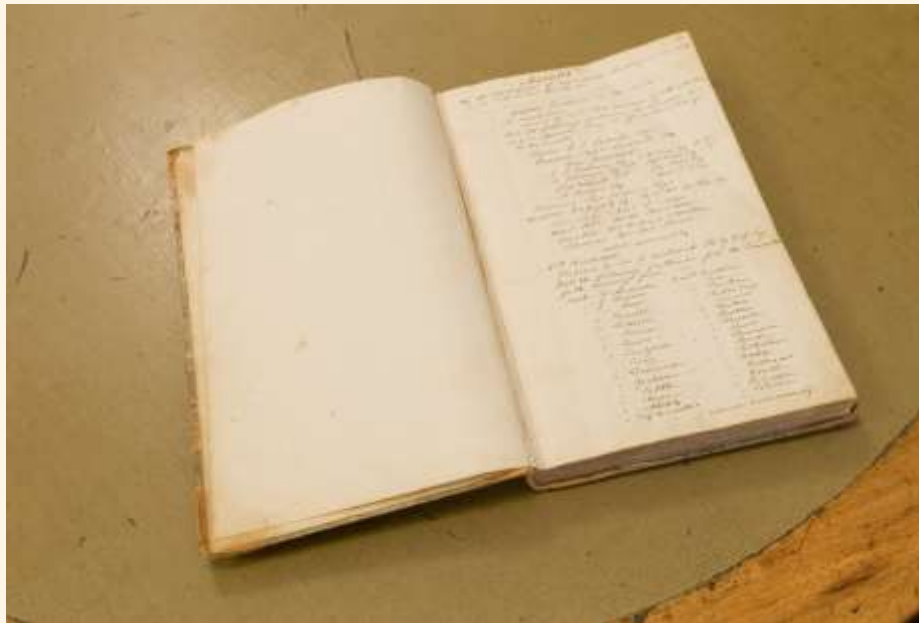
It is likely that the domination of vice-president and office-bearing positions by gentlemen was to appease the thwarted faction involved in the 'secret' meeting referred to earlier. Of the sixteen vice-presidents and office-bearers possibly only assistant secretary William Morrisson, master builder, was a 'mechanic'. Of the thirty-two members of the general committee it is likely that approximately half were mechanics.

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*The Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, Collins Street, Melbourne, c. 1842
Artist unidentified. Royal Historical Society of Victoria.*



*Original Minutes book of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, showing
the election on 12 November, 1839, of the first committee.
Melbourne Athenaeum Archives.*

In the population in 1839 of around 3500, the committee was representative of the 'movers and shakers' of Melbourne Town. These men possessed considerable energy and drive; many were born around the end of the first decade of the 1800s and were eager to be involved in all the major political and social activities of the day. The same names crop up in

the directorate of many other organisations. Seven of the eight members elected to a committee to arrange a Testimonial to Captain Lonsdale for his three years of service were elected the same week to the committee of the Mechanics' Institution.³²

It is interesting to note who was not elected to the Institution's committee. Unsurprisingly, Fawkner was not on the list but nor were Arden or Waterfield. Having supported the mechanics against the 'stacking' of the committee, Arden may have thought it prudent not to stand, or possibly those in the key positions may have not wanted him because of his original stance. The young George Arden was not prudent by nature, his canny instincts belying his youth; he was confrontational and ambitious, having many irons in the fire and able to exert influence in the settlement through his newspaper. A member of the Institution, he remained involved, giving an early lecture to the Institution in May 1840. He was even listed as 'present' and proposing a motion at a committee meeting on 27 November 1839, possibly authorised to act on behalf of an absentee committee member. Waterfield may have been regarded as too close to Fawkner, who had helped him considerably on his arrival in Melbourne. His diary reveals a rather unworldly man and perhaps he saw himself as unequipped to deal with the politics and infighting he witnessed.

In 1839 the members represented a cross-section of the major professions and trades in the community, falling into a number of reasonably well-defined social categories. Paul de Serville, in his *Port Phillip Gentlemen*, considered that the men could be grouped either as those of good society or those outside it. Within good society, he places gentlemen of good family, gentlemen by profession or commission, and gentlemen by upbringing.³³

In his first group of gentlemen, small in number, were those of good birth who belonged to families in the peerage and landed gentry. Representatives on the first committee included a number of vice-presidents: grazier William Yaldwyn, Commissioner of Crown Lands Henry Gisborne, merchant James Graham, and Dr Farquhar McCrae.



*Dr Farquhar McCrae. Portrait by his sister-in-law, Georgiana Huntly McCrae, 1837.
Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Melbourne.*

In his groups ³⁴ 'gentlemen by profession or commission' and 'gentlemen by upbringing' who were prominent in society, de Serville includes members of the Melbourne Club, Anglican clergymen, barristers, graduates of British and European universities, and Army and Navy officers. Included here are the following Mechanics' Institution vice-presidents and office-bearers: banker William Highett, Melbourne's first surveyor Robert Russell, Officer-in-Charge Mounted Police Captain George Smyth,³⁵ and surgeon Dr Alexander Thomson.³⁶ Committee members included prominent merchants Patricius Welsh and William Rucker.

De Serville observed 'Outside good society stood the men of substance and respectability: merchants, civil servants, professional men, squatters, landowners, and others. Eventually as magistrates, town councillors, mayors, and parliamentarians they took part in the public life of the settlement.' Committee members here included builders George Beaver, Peter (Pierre) Bodecin, John Caulfield, Peter Hurlstone, Patrick Mayne (Main), and John Peers, saddler John Dinwoodie, brewer John Murphy, surveyor James Rattenbury, and printer Thomas Strode. Many of these at the time were employers with a sizeable workforce.

De Serville points out that relations between the 'gentlemen' and 'men of substance' were

complicated and often they sat on the same committees. 'Eventually, in the 1850s, many of the respectable colonists were accepted into society. However, during the 1840s there was considerable ill-feeling and rivalry between those in and out of society.'³⁷

What brought these men to Melbourne?

As discussed by James Boyce in his 2012 account of the founding of Melbourne, early incursions into the Port Phillip District were made without government sanction by a group of private adventurers known as the Port Phillip Association. The result of the privateers' actions could be said to have forced the hand of the New South Wales government in authorising settlement in the District in 1836.³⁸

Men who were associated with this group and who would become committee members included aforementioned surgeon Dr Alexander Thomson, Van Diemen's Land Chief Constable Patricius Welsh, and police magistrate James Simpson who would take over from Captain Lonsdale as the Institution's president from 1841. The Association was formed in Hobart in 1835 by those in league with John Batman to acquire land from aborigines in Port Phillip in order to settle permanently. On the strength of a 'treaty' made by Batman with the aborigines in early June 1835, the Association allotted land in Port Phillip to its associates, some of whom lost no time in importing stock from Van Diemen's Land. In late 1835 Batman landed cattle and 500 sheep at Gellibrand's Point (present-day Williamstown); on the same ship Thomson consigned 50 pure Hereford cows.³⁹

Thomson with his wife and small daughter arrived in the settlement in the first part of 1836. He was probably the first committee member, and his the first white family, to arrive in the settlement, which would be named Melbourne the following year. Several weeks later the Wesleyan minister, Rev. James Orton arrived and found the Thomsons living in a tent adjacent to the Batman family on the banks of the Yarra River:

Upon entering their temporary domicile I beheld them with a table roughly laid out but laden with plain good provision – amongst which was a fine snapper recently caught and smoking hot, of which you may suppose I partook heartily, in connection with a delightful cup of tea and good damper. So you see people live sumptuously here as well as in the land of domestic comforts.⁴⁰

Government appointments brought some to Port Phillip. Henry Gisborne who at age twenty-one had taken a government post in Sydney in 1834, was appointed in 1839 by Governor Gipps as the first Commissioner for Crown Lands for Port Phillip. Henry, a committee vice-president, bequeathed his personal book collection to the Institution where it

became the nucleus for its library following his early death in 1841. Another government appointee, Robert Russell, was the first surveyor appointed to Port Phillip, arriving in October 1836 from New South Wales where he had been acting assistant town surveyor.

Extended family groups arriving in Melbourne from New South Wales included that of banker David Charteris McArthur and his younger brother, survey clerk Donald Gordon McArthur, left impoverished after the early death of their father. In 1838, David McArthur, who would be remembered as the 'Father of Victorian Banking' arrived in Melbourne with £3000 in coin, an armed guard and two bulldogs to establish a branch of the Bank of Australasia – the first bank in Melbourne – in a two-roomed brick cottage in Little Collins Street.⁴¹ Whilst in the 1830s those associated with banking and commerce were not considered the social equals of the landed gentry, McArthur, inaugural auditor of the Mechanics' Institution, was an example of those who would blur such boundaries, in his case through hard work, financial acumen, and cultivation of the role of wealthy landowner. His financial and organisational skills were invaluable in the early community and he was appointed a trustee of a number of commercial and religious organisations.

In 1851 he would become a member of that bastion of exclusiveness, the Melbourne Club, and its president in the 1860s. He succeeded Redmond Barry as president of Melbourne's Public Library following the latter's death in 1880, and was a pallbearer at Barry's funeral. The coats of arms of the founding committee are still to be seen in the roof of the Library's portico. After McArthur's death the Public Library's 'Picture Gallery' was renamed the 'McArthur Gallery'.⁴²

Dr Farquhar McCrae and his family arrived from Sydney in 1839. McCrae, and his solicitor brother Andrew played an important part in the early Mechanics' Institution, and Andrew's wife Georgiana McCrae became well known for her miniatures and portraits.

Others who came south from New South Wales included the Institution's treasurer, pastoralist John Gardiner, known as 'the Overlander', who with Joseph Hawdon and John Hepburn made the first overland expedition undertaken to Port Phillip after Governor Bourke had authorised settlement. They set out from Yass in October 1836 with their stock, arriving in an area subsequently named Gardiner's Creek, an outer suburb of Melbourne.⁴³ Vice-president William Yaldwyn overlanded with his stock from New South Wales to Port Phillip in 1837 to the property he had purchased near the Campaspe River.⁴⁴

Not only pastoralists but merchants were attracted by Port Phillip's potential. Early editions

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of the *Port Phillip Advertiser*, *Port Phillip Gazette* and *Port Phillip Patriot and Advertiser* carried advertisements by committee members including merchants William Rucker, James Graham, Skene Craig, Patricius Welsh and others for their imported goods, such as spirits and livestock. Auctioneer Robert Reeves advertised in the *Port Phillip Gazette* of 6 November 1839, the week the Mechanics' Institution was established, that he 'makes no alluring promises, but shall let his mode of doing business speak for itself'.

Merchant, George Porter, whose early career had been with the East India Company in India, transferred his activities from Sydney to Melbourne in September 1839, just prior to his election as a vice-president of the Institution, suggesting previous connections with Melbourne.



*George Porter, merchant, by artist Richard Read Jnr
Copyright Marcus Langdon*

Vice-presidents Henry Gisborne, George B. Smyth, and Dr Farquhar McCrae, auditor William Highett, and committee members William Rucker, Robert Russell, and Patricius Welsh, were early members of the Melbourne Club. Established in 1838, this Club provided a base for the social elite. Others, including vice-presidents Rev. James Clow and Thomas Wills, the Institution's museum curator David Wilkie, committee members Skene Craig, and [either David or Donald] McArthur, would become members of the Port Phillip Club, established in 1840 and sometimes known as the 'second eleven'.

Wealth was a passport to social acceptance. Thomas Wills, a vice-president of the Institution, who had inherited considerable assets, was accepted into the Melbourne social elite in spite of having a father who was transported to Australia for highway robbery.⁴⁵ Society turned a blind eye to Wills's lifestyle. He had a de facto relationship in England, resulting in the birth of four sons, while he had a wife and daughter in Melbourne. Even his return to Australia with an illegitimate four-year-old son in tow seemed not to affect his social standing.⁴⁶



*Thomas Wills, aged about 56 years. Photograph from: Autobiography of Arthur Wills
State Library of Victoria*

There was therefore a tight-knit social elite in Port Phillip not initially open to those outside 'good society'. The social ranking of the foundation committee members of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, based on de Serville's 'within' and 'outside good society' categories, is given in the Appendix.

Connections between the trade members of the community

Although the networks of trade employers were forged through sourcing materials and developing a skilled workforce, influential connections were all-important. Builders were in high demand by those requiring urgent building works and were on the way to becoming major players: 'The size of some of the contracts [for government works] suggests large numbers of men working for employers such as [George] Beaver and [Patrick] Main'.⁴⁷ Beaver, following the completion of Melbourne's new courthouse in 1842, gave a dinner 'in his upper workshop' for eighty employees.⁴⁸ James Rattenbury, who succeeded Robert Russell as clerk of works for the Public Works Department, planned the new courthouse,

and many other essential buildings including the military barracks, the gaol, and the public wharf.⁴⁹

Freemasons' lodges, which were established early would provide a venue for builders Joseph Anderson and Alexander Sims, and printer Thomas Strode to rub shoulders with the gentlemen. Saddler John Dinwoodie, a member of the Caledonian Society and Strode at the Society of St George, would build up useful contacts. Religious affiliations were strong and sometimes of necessity ecumenical; engineer-builder Peter Hurlstone, a Wesleyan, was an organist who in 1843 built an organ for the Anglican St James' Church, which was built by George Beaver using stone sourced by fellow builder Alexander Sims.⁵⁰ In 1841 Anglican services were held in Beaver's new workshop.⁵¹ Presbyterian merchant Skene Craig would have been close to prominent Presbyterian committee members Rev. James Clow and Rev. James Forbes. In 1838, carpenter Peter Bodecin, 'a zealous French Catholic', held prayer meetings in his house and petitioned for a priest.⁵² Congregationalist John Murphy, brewer, and Baptist Robert Reeves, auctioneer, were amongst those who would attend the Auxiliary Bible Society, established in 1840, along with a number of committee gentlemen.

Past regimental ties transcended rank; George Wintle, Melbourne's first gaoler – his establishment known as 'Wintle's Hotel' – had been a drum-major in Captain William Lonsdale's old Regiment, the 4th 'Kings Own'.⁵³ Builders John Peers and John Caulfield were associated not only through building activities but also through music in the Wesleyan church. Peers, musician and singer, led an early choir, accompanied by Caulfield on his clarinet. Relations between Peers and Caulfield were not always harmonious: they appeared in court in December 1838 over an incident in a public house when Caulfield accused Peers of ill-using him. A witness said that they threw glasses of ginger beer at each other, following which Caulfield threw Peers down on a sofa and kicked him. They were fined 10 shillings.⁵⁴

Sporting activities were set up early by those anxious to replicate the landed gentry's traditional leisure activities. These sometimes provided an entrée for those lower on the social scale; Donald McArthur, lowly survey clerk and keen cricketer, is credited with purchasing the first balls, bats and stumps for the fledgling Melbourne Cricket Club.⁵⁵ Printer Thomas Strode raced a horse at Flemington in 1840, an activity dominated by the gentlemen.⁵⁶

During the 1840s a number of these men, initially 'outside good society' would go on to participate in local government. In 1841 builder John Peers was one of seven elected to the

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Market Commission.⁵⁷ Others were elected in early municipal elections, including George Beaver, John Rankin, and Robert Reeves. Brewer John Murphy, who replaced Fawkner in the 1843 Council elections, was described by Edmund Finn in his account of early Melbourne as 'one of the most upright and best-esteemed men in Melbourne', possibly reflecting the high standing with which many 'outside good society' were regarded in early Melbourne.⁵⁸



*Edmund Finn, The Garryowen Chronicles of Early Melbourne 1835-1852.
Athenaeum Library Archives.*

Marriage partners were also important. De Serville observed: 'The ties of marriage were beginning to bind members of society and transform a collection of men of disparate backgrounds into a more unified class based as much on blood and marriage as on shared interests and attitudes.'⁵⁹ Vice-president Presbyterian Rev. James Clow would see two of his daughters married to other committee members of 1839: one to the secretary, Rev. James Forbes, who was Melbourne's Presbyterian Moderator, and another to the Institution's first curator, Dr David Wilkie, a Presbyterian church elder.



Rev. James Clow

*Photo. Historical Records of Victoria. Foundation Series, Vol. 3, p. 498.
From a daguerreotype. National Library of Australia.*

Drawn early to Port Phillip's commercial, agricultural and evangelical opportunities, the men of the founding committee of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution were mostly young, energetic and eager to be part of the fast growing settlement. As we have seen, the early arrivals from Hobart resented the following influx of pastoralists and merchants from New South Wales, reflecting early signs of a Melbourne-Sydney rivalry. By the late 1830s many had developed influential connections, made even stronger by family and marriage alliances. These men represented an influential cohort of the population, drawn from both within and outside the elite society.

Gentlemen dominated early government, military and police appointments supported by a legal system biased against the workers. However, facing a challenge from those associated with banking, commerce and trades, many would struggle to preserve the privileged lifestyle of the British landed gentry. These two disparate groups needed each other at this early stage – indeed their fortunes were intertwined. The growing wealth and increasing voice of those outside 'good society' were beginning to challenge the tradition of breeding as a passport to good society, and this would be exacerbated by the severe economic depression of the early 1840s.

These men played a role in the shifting power structures in the fledgling Port Phillip community at a time when major administrative decisions were referred to New South Wales and governance was slow to catch up with the early entrepreneurial activities. More than a decade later, in 1851, with official separation from New South Wales, which coincided with the discovery of gold, the new Colony of Victoria became subject to greater local bureaucratic controls. The level of freedom experienced by the first settlers was diminished,

and surely Melbourne became, if a little more 'governed', a little less colourful as a result.

The importance of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution

The Melbourne Mechanics' Institution represented 'an important stage in the development of Melbourne's cultural institutions, and more importantly, a crucial prelude to the establishment of the public library, museums and gallery complex'.⁶⁰ Possibly Melbourne's first 'public' library was that set up by Fawkner in 1838, who made his collection of books and a range of English newspapers available to patrons of his hotel. From the early 1840s until the early 1850s the library of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, available to members only, was the only substantial library.⁶¹ In 1851, a committee, of which Redmond Barry was a member, proposed a 'Victoria Subscription Library' to supply 'a want that has been long felt', and published its *Rules, Orders and Bye-Laws*.⁶² The committee had acquired 'the small but well selected Library of the late Tasmanian Society' to which it hoped to add donations. The venture was short-lived and in 1853 trustees were appointed for Melbourne's first Public Library, now the State Library of Victoria.

November 2013 marked the centenary of the domed Reading Room of Melbourne's Public Library; November 2014 marked the 175th anniversary of the establishment of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution. Redmond Barry and David Charteris McArthur had been committee members of the Mechanics' Institution before becoming Trustees of the Public Library; these two establishments would become enduring elements of the cultural landscape of Melbourne.

Appendix

Melbourne Mechanics' Institution: inaugural committee of management.

Based on minutes of the adjourned Meeting held in the Scots School House on 12

November 1839

The members' names are set out in the order of the original minutes.

- ⊙ Captain Lonsdale in the chair –

1st Resolution

- ⊙ Moved by Mr J.J. Peers seconded by Mr Jno Sutherland That the following Gentlemen be requested to act as officers – being ex-officio members of the Committee.

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^b **Patron** C.J. Latrobe Esq

^b **President** Capn Lonsdale, PM [*Police Magistrate*]

⊙

Vice-presidents

⊙ ^a H.F. Gisborne Esq. [*Comm.Crown Lands*] ^a F. McCrae Esq M D

⊙ ^a H. Yaldwyn Esq J.P.[*squatter*] ^c Thos Wills Esq J.P. [*landowner*]

⊙ ^b Cap Smyth J.P. [*OIC mounted police*] ^c Geo Porter Esq [*landowner, merchant*]

⊙ ^b A. Thomson Esq [*surgeon*] ^c Revd J. Clow [*Pres.minister, landowner*]

• Treasurer ^a Jno Gardiner Esq [*pastoralist*]

⊙ Auditors ^b Wm Highett Esq [*banker*] ^c D.C. McArthur Esq, [*banker, landowner*]

⊙ Secretary ^c Revd J. Forbes [*Pres. minister*]

⊙ Assist. Secy ^d Mr W. Morrisson [*builder*]

⊙ Curators ^b Drs Holland and ^b Wilkie

Carried unanimously

2nd Resolution

General Committee

Proposed by Mr J. Coulstock, 2nd by Mr G Say That the following form the Committee for the ensuing year:

⊙ Messrs	^d Anderson, Jos [<i>builder</i>]	Messrs
	^d Hurlstone, Peter [<i>Engineer/build.</i>]	
⊙	^d Beaver, George [<i>builder</i>]	^d Peers, John J. [<i>builder</i>]
⊙	^e Best [<i>?David, builder</i>]	^d Rankin, John [<i>builder</i>]
⊙	^a Brewster, Edward J. [<i>barrister</i>]	^d Rattenbury, James [<i>PWD</i>]
	<i>clerk of works</i>	
⊙	^d Bodecin, Peter [<i>carpenter</i>]	^d Reeves, Robert [<i>auctioneer</i>]
⊙	^e Brown	^b Rucker, Wm F. A. [<i>merchant</i>]
⊙	^b Burns, Thomas [<i>former Pres.min.</i>]	^e Rushton [<i>?Joseph</i>]
⊙	^d Caulfield, John [<i>builder</i>]	^b Russell, Robert
	<i>[arch./surv.]</i>	
⊙	^c Craig, Skene [<i>merchant</i>]	^d Sims, Alexander
	<i>[?surveyor]</i>	
⊙	^d Dinwoodie, John [<i>saddler</i>]	^e Stevenson, [<i>?Joseph, builder</i>]
⊙	^a Graham, James [<i>merchant</i>]	^d Strode, Thomas [<i>printer</i>]
⊙	^e Kibble	^e Sutherland, John [<i>builder</i>]
⊙	^d Mayne, Patrick [<i>carpenter/builder</i>]	^a Welsh, Patricius Wm
	<i>[merchant]</i>	

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⊙	^d Murphy, John R. [<i>brewer</i>]	^b Williams, C. [<i>?accountant</i>]
⊙	^d Macarthur, Donald G. [<i>surveying clerk</i>]	^d Wintle, George [<i>gaoler</i>]
⊙		^e Robertson
⊙		^e Paterson

Carried unanimously

Key:

[^aGentleman by birth; ^bGentleman by profession or occupation; ^caccepted as Gentleman through wealth, occupation, etc.; ^dmechanic; ^eindeterminate]

After classification by Paul de Serville, *Port Phillip Gentlemen and good society before the goldrushes*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 31-34.

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Endnotes

¹ Extract from the 'Minutes of the Annual General Meeting, Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, 1 June 1840', Melbourne Athenaeum Library Archives.

² See Derek Whitlock, *The Great Tradition: a history of adult education in Australia*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1974, pp. 26 – 27.

³ J. Woolley, *The Universal Diffusion of Curiosity and Information*, 1861 lecture, reproduced in I. Turner, ed., *The Australian Dream*, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968, pp. 87 – 88.

⁴ *Port Phillip Gazette* Melbourne, 9 October 1839, p. 3.

⁵ *Port Phillip Gazette* Melbourne, 5 January 1839, pp. 2 – 3.

⁶ *Port Phillip Gazette* 17 October, 1839, p 2.

⁷ Kevin Quigley 'Introduction', *The Melbourne Athenaeum 170 years 1839 – 2009: a Journal of the History of a Melbourne Institution*, Melbourne: Melbourne Athenaeum Inc., 2009.

⁸ Entry for 5 November, 1839, *Reverend William Waterfield Journal 1837 – 1864*, State Library of New South Wales: A 1375. Also available as an extract in *Historical Records of Victoria*, Foundation Series, volume 3: *The*

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Early Development of Melbourne 1836 – 1839, Michael Cannon, ed., Melbourne: Govt. Printing Office, 1984, p. 562.

⁹ *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser*, 7 November 1839, p.3.

¹⁰ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 6 November 1839, p.4.

¹¹ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 16 November 1839, p.3.

¹² C.Wood and M.Askew, *St Michael's Church Melbourne: formerly the Collins Street Independent Church*, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1992, p.14.

¹³ Marc Askew, *The Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: mechanics' institutes in nineteenth century Victoria*, MA thesis, Monash University, 1982, p.26, footnote 17. J.Lundie, 'The Melbourne Mechanics' Institute, 1839 – 1872', Hons thesis, The University of Melbourne, 1955, p.10. Jill Eastwood (née Lundie) in 1994 repeated her 1955 comment in her contribution 'The Melbourne Mechanics' Institute: its first 30 years' in in P.C.Candy and J.Laurent, eds, 'Pioneering Culture: Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia', Adelaide: Auslib Press, 1994, p. 66.

¹⁴ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 16 November 1839, p.5.

¹⁵ *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser Supplement*, 14 November, 1839.

¹⁶ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 16 November 1839, p.4.

¹⁷ Entry for 12 November 1839, Reverend William Waterfield Journal.

¹⁸ *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser*, 18 November 1839, p. 7. John Arnold, editor of the *La Trobe Journal*, suggests that Fawcner himself, 'J.P.F.' might have been 'O.P.Q.', writing the letter for his own *Patriot* newspaper.

¹⁹ C.P. Billot, *The Life and Times of John Pascoe Fawcner*, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985, p.199.

²⁰ T.L. Work, *The Early Printers of Melbourne: 1838 – 1858*, Australasian Typographical Journal, Melbourne, August 1897, vol. XXXVIII, no. 326, p. 1.

²¹ P.L. Brown, *George Arden (1820?-1854) in Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/arden-george-1714>. Arden's birth date has not been confirmed, but it was believed by contemporaries that he was born about 1820. In the 18 September 1839 issue of the *Port Phillip Gazette*, in a diatribe against merchants 'McCrae and Welsh' Arden acknowledged that his opponents referred to him as the 'Boy Editor of the *Gazette*'.

²² *Port Phillip Gazette*, 18 & 22 April, 1840.

²³ *Minutes Annual General Meeting*, Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, 1 June 1840.

²⁴ T.Strode, *Annals and Reminiscences of Bygone Days with Incidents Not Generally Known by a Melbournite of 1838*, (written in 1869 – 70). Quoted in M. Cannon & I. Macfarlane, eds, *Historic Records of Victoria*, vol. 4, Melbourne: Government Printing Office, 1985, p. 516.

²⁵ Fawcner commenced publication of Melbourne's first newspaper *The Melbourne Advertiser* in January 1838 as a handwritten newssheet available to the patrons of his hotel. After nine issues it became a printed paper, Fawcner having acquired a printing press. After issue 17 in April 1838, it was closed down by police magistrate Lonsdale, pending a licence from New South Wales. Arden and Strode commenced publication of the officially authorised *Port Phillip Gazette* in October 1838, and Fawcner, now with official blessing, launched his *Port Phillip Patriot & Melbourne Advertiser* on 29 April 1839.

²⁶ J. Bonwick, *Early Struggles of the Victorian Press*, Melbourne: Gordon & Gotch, 1890, p. 52.

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- ²⁷ *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol.3, p. 530.
- ²⁸ Strode, 'Annals', vol. 1, pp. 141-142.
- ²⁹ Work, p.2.
- ³⁰ Billot, p.201.
- ³¹ Strode, 'Annals', vol. 2, pp. 46-48.
- ³² *Port Phillip Gazette*, 13 November 1839, p. 3.
- ³³ P. de Serville, *Port Phillip Gentlemen and Good Society Before the Goldrushes*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 31–34.
- ³⁴ See Appendix. Biographical information on many of the men listed can be found in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/>)
- ³⁵ Spelling of Smyth/Smythe: The spelling 'Smyth' is generally used. Edmund Finn used 'Smyth', with a few exceptions. Vol. 3, *Index to Edmund Finn's 'Garryowen' Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835-1852*, [Melbourne: Fergusson and Mitchell, 1888], with biographical details by Michael Cannon, uses 'Smythe'. It is likely that confusion has arisen between the names of George Brunswick Smyth and his contemporary George Douglas Smythe, surveyor-squatter, as has occurred in some recent publications.
- ³⁶ Dr Alexander Thomson has been confused by some with his contemporary Alexander Thomson who was a servant of John Batman and a signatory to John Batman's Title Deeds with aboriginal chiefs in June 1835. Both were closely involved with Batman.
- ³⁷ De Serville, p. 33.
- ³⁸ James Boyce, *1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia*, Melbourne: Black Inc, 2011, passim.
- ³⁹ Edmund Finn 'Garryowen' *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835-1852*, Melbourne: Fergusson and Mitchell, 1888, p. 566.
- ⁴⁰ Letter from Rev J.R.Orton to Mrs Sarah Orton, 20 April 1836, in 'The Establishment and Early Operations of the Wesleyan Mission', *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 2A, *The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835 – 1839*, Michael Cannon, ed., Melbourne: Victorian Government Printing Office, 1982, p. 79.
- ⁴¹ G.Blainey, 'David Charteris McArthur, 1808 – 1887', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcarthur-david-charteris-4058>.
- ⁴² J.A. Tosolini, *David Charteris McArthur: a colonial gentlemen*, MA thesis, Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2002. Copy [MS 14608] held at the Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, passim.
- ⁴³ A.G.L. Shaw *A History of the Port Phillip District: Victoria before Separation*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 1996, p. 63.
- ⁴⁴ J.O. Randell, *Yaldwyn of the Golden Spurs: the life of William Henry Yaldwyn 1801 – 1866, Sussex squire, Australian squatter, member of the Legislative Council of Queensland*, Victoria, Mast Gully Press, 1980, passim.
- ⁴⁵ Loder & Bayly, M. McBriar, *Heidelberg Conservation Study*, Heidelberg City Council, Melbourne: 1985, p. 77.
- ⁴⁶ A.Wills, *Autobiography of Arthur Wills*, MS MF 168, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, passim.
- ⁴⁷ Martin Sullivan, *Men and Women of Port Phillip*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1985, p. 55.
- ⁴⁸ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 30 July 1842.

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⁴⁹ Michael Cannon, *Old Melbourne Town Before the Gold Rush*, Main Ridge, Victoria, Loch Haven Books, 1991, passim.

⁵⁰ Hilary Lewis, *A History of St James' Old Cathedral, Melbourne*, 2nd edition, Melbourne, Rowprint, 1993, p.12.

⁵¹ *Garryowen* (Finn), p.123.

⁵² *Garryowen* (Finn), pp.136-137.

⁵³ John M.Wilkins *Life and Times of Captain William Lonsdale 'Nieuwe Dieper', 1799–1864*, Melbourne: Wilkins, 1991, pp.48–49.

⁵⁴ M. Cannon & P. Jones, eds, *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 1, *Beginnings of Permanent Government*, Melbourne: Victorian Government Printing Office, 1981, pp. 338-339.

⁵⁵ *Garryowen* (Finn), pp. 735-736.

⁵⁶ *Garryowen* (Finn), p. 718.

⁵⁷ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 1 June, 1842.

⁵⁸ *Garryowen* (Finn), p. 274 and Chapter XXI.

⁵⁹ de Serville, p. 41.

⁶⁰ Allom, Lovell, Sanderson Pty Ltd in conjunction with the Heritage Group, Public Works Department, Victoria, *State Library and Museum of Victoria Buildings: conservation analysis* Melbourne, 1985, p. 10.

⁶¹ Lundie, 1955, Askew, 1982, passim.

⁶² *Rules, Orders and Bye-Laws of the Victoria Subscription Library*, Melbourne, Printed by Benjamin Lucas, 1851.

Anne Marsden, Athenaeum Archives.