
A Williamstown Doctor

Edward Garland Figg 1815 - 1902

EIGHTEEN-FIFTEEN was the year of the battle of Waterloo, in which my great-great-grandfather, Edward Figg, fought as a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Engineers. His fourth son, Edward Garland, was born at Plymouth a few months before the battle. He was to qualify in medicine at Glasgow and migrate to Williamstown fifty years later. His mother was from Watervale in Ireland, the youngest daughter of a fellow-officer named Armstrong. At fifteen she was judged too young to marry, so that Colonel Figg had to wait until she left the schoolroom.

She was by all accounts a forceful personality, reputed to have sent a governess back to England for daring to sit down in her presence. She and her husband both died in Quebec, and the four children returned to Great Britain for their education.

Edward Garland Figg was registered as a Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (LFPSG). In Victoria he was variously credited with an MD and a MRCP but there is little doubt that these were mere 'courtesy titles'. In Scotland he was a friend and associate of James Young Simpson in the early work on chloroform, and he remained an ardent advocate of anaesthesia, in spite of several untoward accidents.

He practised medicine for eleven years at Bo'ness in Linlithgowshire and seems to have been highly regarded and handsomely rewarded when he left. He was then aged fifty. At the age of thirty-seven he had married his cousin, Annie Hudson, who was twenty-two. They had six children and the prospect of providing for five daughters in the depressed economy of Scotland, together

with a spirit of enterprise and energy, may have prompted the move to Australia. He at least had the foresight to come out with just one of his daughters to survey the prospects. Harriette, aged thirteen, kept him company on the *Great Britain*, and their names can be checked on the ship's manifest for 1864 in Bristol, where this historic ship has been restored. She was the first of the steam-driven iron passenger ships, but was furnished also with a full set of masts and rigging - a sort of 'belt and braces' job. Her career was about to end as a coal-hulk on the South American coast, when by public subscription she was towed back to Bristol.

In 1865 Edward Garland Figg was registered by the Medical Board of Victoria as Vaccinator for Williamstown 'in the room of Dr Wilkins, absent on leave'. He succeeded to the practice of Dr Wilkins and his home 'Ednam', the traditional 'doctor's house' at 231 Nelson Place. It is a solid two-storey bluestone house, built for Dr Wilkins in 1850-52, still standing, and on the Register of Historic Buildings. It achieved notoriety in 1857 when convicts working at Point Gellibrand attacked John Price, the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments. He was carried to the house in a barrow and died in an upstairs bedroom next day.

For two years, 1860-1861, this house was leased by Dr Wilkins to Frank Liardet as the Clarendon Hotel. Apart from this it was a doctor's residence and surgery from 1852 until the death of Dr Donald Coutts and the sale of his estate in 1976. In succession to Drs Wilkins and Figg, it housed Drs Honman, Yuille, John Thomson, W Orchard, D Powers and Dr Coutts. After 1976 it was restored as a private residence and since 1987 it has been converted to a flourishing restaurant 'Sails'.

Annie Jane Figg and her family followed her husband two years later, leaving one daughter with relatives in Ireland, later to rejoin the family. Not long after, in 1867, the youngest child Eliza Jane died at the age of five.

FIGG was for some time the Health Officer and Port Doctor in Williamstown. The sanitary conditions of the time are vividly described by Lynne Strahan in her history, *At the Edge of the Centre*, and can be derived also from the 'Local Topics' entries of the *Australian Medical Journal*. In 1867 it records a Public Health Bill relating to the pollution of streams. This was knocked back by the Assembly, which, in the words of the Editor, "Seems bent upon turning the running streams of the Colony into sewers". In the same month there is recorded a 'filthy

nuisance in the shape of a night-soil deposit at Richmond', the chief objectors to its removal being a medical man and a chemist.

A Public Health Act in 1854 established the Central Board of Health with William McCrea MD as President, and made provision for local Boards. These were charged with the prevention, containment and treatment of infectious and contagious diseases; the construction and maintenance of adequate drains and sewers; the regulation of noxious trades, the cleansing of streets and public ways and the maintenance of adequate standards of sanitation and ventilation in both public and private premises. Fine words, but Williamstown was not sewered until 1910; it was downstream from the growing city, and much of Melbourne's effluent ended up on the Strand. The morgue was a cramped and ramshackle building on the foreshore, without ventilation or drainage, and the various waste products were swept out the door and on to the beach. It was the lack of an adequate water supply which swung the decision against Williamstown and in favour of Melbourne as the seat of government in the young colony.

But Williamstown was the port, and Hobson's Bay was full of ships in the gold-rush and after - some deserted by their crews, and all with rubbish to dispose of. The streets were fouled with dead cats and dogs, the offal from butcher shops and the run-off from pigsties. Figg recommended these be removed from the town. Infectious diseases were rife - measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria and tuberculosis; he suggested that the cramped and huddled cottages of the time be separated by a garden strip to minimise contagion.

Smallpox was much feared. and one of his duties was to board ships where there was any suspicion of the disease. The information would often come through the Pilot, who boarded the ship at the Heads, or through the Customs Officer. A stairway gave access to the roof of 'Ednam', where a telescope was installed to survey the shipping in Hobson's Bay and look for the warning yellow flag. In 1878 the P&O steamship *Siam* reported three suspicious eruptions among its Lascar seamen. Figg thought it was chicken-pox but he was over-ruled by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr McCrea, who dispatched the ship to the Quarantine Station at the Heads. Such was the fear that the boat which had brought the seamen to shore was disinfected and sunk. There were no further cases. Vaccination in infancy was at that time compulsory.

Figg must have made the acquaintance of James Beaney soon after his arrival. To Figg's daughters, the surgeon was a well-remembered and flamboyant visitor to the house. In 1866 we find Figg giving evidence on Beaney's behalf at his trial for criminal abortion, which is fully reported in the *Australian Medical Journal*.

At this trial, Figg claimed he had attended 7000 cases of midwifery.. He "believed he had manipulated the uterus more than any man in Europe" and that "it was impossible, for he had tried many times, to introduce the hand into the uterus at the fifth month". If he is correctly reported, these claims are astonishing and, to us, quite damaging.

He believed that the woman's death had resulted from "pyaemia, chlorosis, and sub-involution", and that there had been no evidence of pregnancy. He criticised Pugh and Rudall, the pathologists, for making a careless examination - the ovaries were mislaid. We would find the evidence highly suspect.

At Beaney's first trial before Sir Redmond Barry the jury failed to agree. At a re-trial in the Supreme Court before Mr Justice Williams the jury returned a verdict of Not Guilty to "uproarious applause".

As a recognition of services rendered Beaney presented Figg with a handsome ornate silver mug. The inscription reads: *From James G Beaney, FRCS to EG Figg Esq MD as a slight token of his admiration for his ability as a practitioner and thanks for the noble way in which he stood forward to defend a professional brother from the malicious charge brought against him in May and June 1866.*

Figg himself survived some similar episodes. In 1876 he operated on one Emma Jane Bennett, aged thirty-two, the wife of an engine-driver and the mother of nine children. The indications were haemorrhage and sepsis, and she had denied pregnancy. At autopsy, by Dr

Girdlestone, the cavity of the uterus was enlarged and there were tubercles in the lung and Bright's disease of the kidneys. The jury verdict was death from blood-poisoning.

More than twenty years later, in 1889, in the Supreme Court, he faced a charge of 'using an instrument with intent to procure an abortion'.

Margaret Dietrich was a widow who kept a boarding-house in Prahran. She deposed that she attended Dr Figg, being (in the parlance of that time) 'not unwell' for two months, feeling sick and thinking she might be in the family way. She was given something to smell and lost consciousness. On waking she had severe lower abdominal pain but managed to walk to the station. She had to take a hansom cab at the South Yarra end. Next day she had severe pain and haemorrhage, and was seen by a nurse who claimed to see fragments of a "sponge tent" in the clots. The nurse apparently reported the case to the local police. A local doctor was called next day and evacuated clots but she thereafter became febrile and very ill.

She did recover, with no apparent ill-feelings towards her doctors. The medical evidence was equivocal. Figg admitted passing a sound for the treatment of "retained menses" but denied intent to procure abortion or the use of a "sponge tent". Dr Davenport thought this was acceptable treatment and the pathologist who examined the clot thought the evidence "not conclusive of pregnancy". Figg reserved his defence and was found not guilty. In the face of the evidence we would consider him lucky.

In those days of poverty, large families, no effective contraception and the social ostracism of unwed mothers it must have been hard to withstand the desperate appeals of the unhappily pregnant. I think that Figg was more soft-hearted than hard-headed - he certainly made no fortune from illegal operations. Margaret Dietrich said she offered him five pounds but he claimed he did it "for charity". He retired soon after at the age of seventy-five to have treatment overseas for cataract.

He was given to verse. *In Dolore Scriptum* appeared soon after his trial, in the local paper. I quote one verse:

In age advanced, mid joy and ills,
A long career I trace,
Led by that Power whose presence fills
Immensity and space
Through troubled scenes I've safely passed
And dangers dark defied.
Will He not keep me to the last,
My King, my God, my Guide.

There were some other less serious but rather surprising legal hiccoughs. He was twice charged with assault, and it appears he inherited from his Irish mother a rather short fuse. He also espoused causes with great intensity.

It was a litigious era. In 1867 the *Australian Medical Journal* in one issue, under 'Local Topics' reported three instances of medical men in court. One was fined a shilling for committing an assault on the wife of one of his tenants, upon whom he was serving a notice of ejection. A Mr Govett of Hamilton was fined forty shillings and costs for using profane and abusive language, and at the Williamstown Police Court Mr Figg was fined two pounds with three pounds costs for assaulting a Mrs Amelia Kingston.

Dr Neild's scrap-book has a fuller account in a newspaper cutting - the provocation was homeopathy. On visiting a baby whom he was currently treating he saw a homeopathic remedy on a nearby table. He became enraged, took off his hat and invoked the great curse of Heaven upon the mother. A neighbour intervened between him and the child and it was alleged that he called her by most opprobrious epithets and knocked her down upon the bed. The defendant claimed he had

merely pushed her back when she caught hold of him, but the Bench found against him and imposed the fine.

In the second case in 1879 he was more fortunate. It was alleged by a Mrs Boswell that with a man named Andrew, Mr Figg rushed into her house in pursuit of her son, and that she was struck twice on the breast causing serious injury. In defence Mr Figg said he had seen the son ill-treating young Andrew and called on him to desist. When young Boswell ran away he followed him to his father's house, where Figg was set upon by Mrs Boswell with a broomstick and by her daughter with a tin dipper. The jury found for the defendant.

Homeopathy was a very live issue, provoking in 1870 a great deal of adverse comment in the *Australian Medical Journal* and an account of the prosecution of a confectioner for prescribing homeopathic globules. Mr Figg's part in the controversy draws acid editorial comment:

“A foolish pamphlet, by a foolish person, on homeopathy generally, and abuse of this Journal particularly, has led to a vindication of allopathy by Mr Figg of Williamstown. If it amuses Mr Figg to vindicate allopathy, there is no reason why he should not be amused, but if he thinks to convince homeopaths of the absurdity of their so-called system, by any kind of argument, he is as much in error as if he were to give lectures on the Differential Calculus to a congregation of aboriginals.”

This was not the only cause that he espoused with fervour. Controversy was meat and drink to him, beginning in his twenties when he debated the Swedenborgians. Lynne Strahan credits him with a “formidable if obscure intelligence”. The teachings of Darwin and Huxley were anathema. Not that he was a Creationist; he believed that science could illuminate the origins of the Universe, but refused to see it as unplanned and godless. The chief enemy was Atheism.

His convictions he embodied in a series of long, abstruse and almost unreadable pamphlets. “Rational Theory of Life - opposition to Huxley” has been preserved as cuttings in a large family scrap-book. It was succeeded in 1890 by the “Analysis of Theology Revealed” and in 1893 a long letter on “The Church of the Future”, in support of science and setting out the obstacles to further belief in ‘revealed Truth’. “Science is an offspring of Omniscience, a distinguishing attribute of Deity.”

He was by no means alone in his rejection of Darwinian evolution. In the Melbourne community the theory was initially opposed by Frederick Mueller, the botanist, Professor Halford, founder of the Medical School and Professor McCoy who was a noted palaeontologist.

Figg was reputedly at home in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Sanskrit. He had quantities of verse published in the Williamstown Chronicle, some of it in Latin with an English paraphrase, preserved by his daughters as cuttings in the family scrap-books. I find his poetry a good deal more lucid and succinct than his prose. It covers a great range of subjects - “The Death of Cavour” (the Italian patriot), “Elementary Ideas of Science”, Lady Augusta Scott, his grandson's eleventh birthday, and a virulent attack on William Ewart Gladstone for his Irish policy. Much of it has a high moral or religious tone, but he writes an “Elegy on the Death of his favourite Scotch Deerhound”, and comments thus on evolution:

“Shall we unto the earthworm say

Potentially in thee

The unborn world invested lay
By chance events set free?"

He was a militant Protestant in an age of high sectarian tension, and inevitably a member of the Loyal Orange Lodge. He edited their journal for four years and became their Grand Master and in receipt of an ornate bound illuminated address when he went overseas. His extreme anti- Catholic views he expresses in his verses on Gladstone, who proposed Home Rule for Ireland.

"The Protestants - the noblest souls Who stood in Britain's cause
Beneath the heel of Rome he rolls, The victims of such laws"

His "Catechism of Irish History" is a pamphlet in question and answer form, demolishing any arguments in favour of the Irish and against the English occupation, and highly defamatory of the native inhabitants of Ireland. He admits to "an undisguised antipathy to Romanists as a class" and one Prior Butler he describes as "an ecclesiastical, oleaginous sinuosity".

This sectarianism bedevilled his relationship with Dr Goldie, a Roman Catholic doctor in Williamstown, but he seems to have been a good friend of Dr McLean, whose son cared for him in his last illness.

His zest for controversy and innovation found other outlets. He chaired a meeting to form a branch of the Victorian Funeral Reform Association., which aimed to achieve economy with dignity, and to reduce the overall cost of a funeral to three pounds nine shillings. In 1876 he moved to form a Free Trade League, but according to Strahan., contrived to make a protectionist speech. Also in that year he took part in a demonstration of mesmerism and extracted a tooth from a compliant subject at a public meeting. This led him to the rash inference that mesmerism might take precedence over chloroform in the anaesthetic field.

It appears we have to give him credit as a pioneer feminist. The evidence lies in some satirical verse in the *Williamstown Chronicle* in June 1869, with the title "Dr Figg's Woman", the author entitled only 'Punch'. I cannot forebear to quote some of the eleven verses:

A new-light teacher, Dr Figg -
At Williamstown he's a big Wig, Where lectured he on woman -
Her proper place assigns in life
As a free agent, not a wife, Submissive to her beau, man.
Oh! Dr Figg

He praised her intellect, her love;
He praised her to the clouds above; He praised her to the skies;
He praised her virtue, learning, grace; Her varied talents, mien, and face;
And praised her lovely eyes.
Ah ! Dr Figg

Punch joins in all this praise so far; But, not content with praising her ,
Figg advocates her rights
To be man's equal, and as free
To do just what she likes as he - Wear hat, and coat, and tights !
Tights ! Dr Figg

'Twas thus, he said, the matter stood: - Her intellect was quite as good,
Attainments quite as high
As man's Why should she not be free
To choose her course in life as he,
And for its prizes try?

Try, Dr Figg

A woman may a doctor be, Prescribe a dose and take a fee
And all the like of that;
But as for female surgery , Dissection and anatomy,
I don't believe in that.

That! Dr Figg

He was a fervent advocate and practitioner of chloroform anaesthesia in spite of at least two unhappy incidents with it:

In 1871 the *Australian Medical Journal* reported a death from chloroform at the house of Mr Figg in Williamstown. It was a young married woman who required some surgery to the hand. At the inquest a verdict of accidental death was returned.

In 1879 he was called to treat the cook of the *Loch Shiel* for varicose veins and ulcers. He saw him at 7pm in his cabin, said to be seven foot long and six foot high. When chloroform was administered on a handkerchief the patient 'rose up and struggled violently for about two minutes then fell back with alarming symptoms'. His feet were held up at a forty-five degree angle, but his pulse failed and he died. The post-mortem verdict was 'asphyxia from inhaling chloroform'. It was probably a cardiac arrest or arrhythmia. The coroner found no evidence of negligence or recklessness but recommended that a second medical practitioner be present when chloroform was administered - the profession of anaesthetist was launched.

A further coroner's inquest followed the death of a Dr Macartney MLA. found to be 'verging on delirium tremens, sleepless and depressed'. He was emaciated and a heavy drinker. He failed to respond to chloral hydrate and brandy and died three days later with 'congestion of the brain and paralysis of the heart'. He may also have taken aconite liniment by mouth! There seems to have been ample cause for his demise.

Of course, only the disasters are recorded, and Figg seems to have been well-regarded as a doctor and a surgeon. We find him in 1869 at a meeting of the newly-formed Victorian Medical Association, delivering a paper on the removal of the thyroid gland and two years later two papers on "The Action of Alcohol in Health" and "The Action of Alcohol in Disease". He addressed the same subject at the International Temperance Conference in Melbourne 1880.

This Victorian Medical Association held its first meeting on January 8th 1869 in the Port Philip Club Hotel and Figg was a foundation member of the committee. The president was a Mr Cornelius Stewart, and further meetings seem to have been held in the Board Room of the Melbourne Hospital. The Association was apparently out of favour with the editor of the *Australian Medical Journal*, who refers to it as "the so-called Medical Association of Victoria".

The railway to Williamstown was laid down in 1859, and heavy industry followed. The Naval Dockyards opened in 1860 and the Railway Workshops in 1868. It is hard to envisage an industrial and shipping centre such as Williamstown was in the '60s to '80s without a hospital facility. It was not until 1894 that the Hospital was opened by the Minister for Defence. The committee of management minutes and the first annual report in 1895 are signed by EG Figg as President. He stood down next year, being then eighty years old, but is recorded as an Honorary Medical Officer until 1901. His daughter Annie remained a Life Governor. The hospital's history and its struggle for funding have been fully documented by Dr Lynne Strahan in her book *The Bay to Look Upon* and the hospital archives are cared for by Geoffrey Preston, a former CEO.

IN THESE later years of the nineteenth century, Williamstown was not only a centre of migrant and commercial shipping but became increasingly important as the home of the Port Philip Pilot Service and the Victorian Navy. In 1867 *HMS Nelson* was loaned to the Victorian Government as a training ship for the Naval Force. It was a wooden battleship built in 1814, the largest to that date. The *Cerberos* arrived in 1871 as a part gift from the Imperial Government, after a hazardous journey. She was a cumbersome iron gun platform which never thereafter went outside the Heads.

When a merchant naval officer broke his ankle playing football Dr Figg took him home to be looked after by his daughters. He was Frederick Tickell. He married Mary Figg and later became Commodore of the Victorian Navy and took a naval contingent to the Boxer Rising in China. He ended his career as a Rear-Admiral. They were my mother's parents.

EDWARD Figg's family life was not free from tragedy. The youngest daughter, Eliza Jane, died at five years, just after their arrival in the colony. Her death certificate reads "Scarlatina accompanied by rheumatism and followed by disease of the heart" - a duration of four weeks. His wife died at forty-eight, the cause certified by Dr McLean as "serious effusion on the brain" - one would surmise meningitis. His only son, James Carnegie, went to Williamstown Grammar School and then to Edinburgh to qualify in medicine and succeed to his father's practice. He died only months after his return at the age of twenty-nine, from "valvular disease of the heart of five years' duration".

Pursuing these three death certificates gave me an illuminating insight into the pattern of mortality in Williamstown at that time. The photostats from the Registrar's office record five serial deaths on each page, a very small but random series. Of these fifteen only two are over the age of forty, a man of sixty-eight with bronchitis and hepatitis and forty-eight-year-old Mrs Figg. Of the rest, a sailmaker fell down the hold of the *City of Melbourne*, a woman of thirty-two died of post-partum haemorrhage, there were two deaths each from phthisis and typhoid and one from pneumonia, and no less than six from disease we now recognise as due to haemolytic streptococcal infection, that is scarlatina, rheumatic fever, valvular heart disease and nephritis in various combinations.

Of the son, Dr Carnegie Figg, we have no formal records (other than his death certificate) but a few tangible memorabilia. There is a full dance program of '76 when he was 19. He danced two quadrilles and the lancers with Miss E MacKnight. One dance he 'flirted' and one he 'mooned' and one he spent on the verandah. There are also from Edinburgh the case for his professional cards, with the copper template, and a medical diary for 1886 with entries of patients' names ceasing abruptly on March 30th.

DR FIGG retired from medical practice in 1890 when he was seventy-five and needed an operation for cataract. This was successfully carried out in the United Kingdom. He maintained

his output of philosophy and theology in prose and verse. Two of his daughters, Mary and May, had married sea-faring men, but Annie and Harriette remained at home to care for him and to foster two children who had been orphaned on the outward journey. Obituary notices make much of their kindness to the poor in the community, particularly those whose misfortune arose through the “demon drink”.

The Nelson Place house and surgery were leased to Dr Honman at eighty pounds per annum, and the Figg family moved to ‘Miora’, a single-story weatherboard house in the Strand in a big garden. I have happy memories of visits in the 1920s. Aunt Annie was almost blind and mildly eccentric in ways that endeared her to children. She harboured an aged cockatoo who had the run of the house; there were fowls to be fed and an assortment of stray cats and dogs, home-brewed ginger beer and the shallow rocky foreshore at the end of the ferry crossing. She died in 1937 when I was a medical student and able to inherit the Beaney mug and great-grandfather’s wooden mon-aural stethoscope.

DR FIGG died intestate in 1902 at the age of eighty-seven, suffering from chronic bronchitis. The record of Probate shows his estate valued at £7876, including the Nelson Place house at nine hundred pounds and the Strand house at seven hundred and fifty pounds. His daughter Annie administered the estate.

Obituary notices are elaborate and fulsome in the manner of the time. The *Chronicle* gives him more than a column, with stress on his scholarship, his generosity and his public spirit. He is interred with his wife and family under a severely plain four-square obelisk in the Williamstown Cemetery.

Reviewing this life, one is struck by the impotence of the medical man of that age. Opium was the sole analgesic, digitalis the only cardiac medication, pharmacology was as yet unborn. There was nothing against sepsis nor the infectious diseases, except vaccination for smallpox. Small wonder that homeopathy had a following, as indeed do herbal remedies and aromatherapy in today's alternative medicine.

Figg’s scholarship reflects his rigorous Scottish upbringing, and his many non-medical interests mirror the intellectual ferment of his time - in particular the post-Darwinian debate, the Free Trade issue, the Irish question and the sectarian strife. It was an era which looked to the medical profession as leaders in public debate and popular opinion.

Family photographs record a benign, tall, bearded figure seated in his garden with his treasured Scottish deerhound, but his life and work reflect a man of energy, of passionate convictions, formidable learning and convoluted thought. To us his ideas are often bizarre and wrong-headed but he was undoubtedly a kind and generous man with great feeling for the human race.

The curiously apt epitaph on that solid tombstone seems to bring Edward Garland Figg a touch closer to us:

“Teach me to feel another’s woe, To hide the fault I see.
That mercy I to others show, That mercy show to me.”

Margaret Henderson Parkville. Mav 1997

Sources

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