

Blair, John (1834-1887)

John Blair (1834-1887) was born on 9 February 1834 in Bo'ness, Linlithgowshire, Scotland, the son of a master mariner Alexander Blair, and of his wife née, Margaret Paris. He was trained at Glasgow and Edinburgh and was admitted L.R.C.S. (Edin.) in 1857. He arrived in Melbourne at the end of that year, registered with the Medical Board of Victoria early in 1858 and practised in several inner suburbs before finally settling at 101 Collins Street in the mid-sixties.

He joined the Medical Society of Victoria soon after his arrival and in 1860 he began a ten-year term as its secretary. On 27 April 1867 Blair married Mary Hunter, a young woman whom he had known since childhood days in Scotland. The marriage was childless. Sometime during the eighties, the Blairs adopted an aboriginal boy from North Queensland called Lani Mulgrave (afterwards Lani Blair) who died at the age of seventeen in 1900.

A failed attempt at assassination of Prince Alfred at Clontarf, NSW, on 12 March 1868, was followed by a surge of Royalist sentiment. Quite soon it was decided to build the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. However, similar public sentiment in Melbourne proposing the building of a hospital south of the Yarra was met with sufficient resistance to delay the process by several years. Much of the resistance came from supporters of the Melbourne Hospital, which was experiencing some financial difficulties that its supporters feared would be worsened if subscribers transferred their allegiance to a new hospital. Blair was a strong advocate for the proposed new hospital and was also a vociferous complainant about the unsanitary problems of the Melbourne Hospital. The opposing views led to a considerable schism within the Medical Society.

The campaign for the new hospital was eventually successful. It opened in 1871. Its centenary history confidently states, "John Blair was the man most responsible for the foundation of the Alfred Hospital." Despite a hostile campaign against him, Blair was elected to the hospital committee and appointed to honorary medical staff. He was elected Chair of medical staff in 1877.

In 1866 he had been elected Fellow of the Obstetrical Society of London; in 1872, president of the Medical Society of Victoria; and in 1874, F.R.C.S. (Edin.); also in 1874 he was admitted M.B. at Sydney University and in 1877, M.D. Amidst these achievements there were also some setbacks. He faced insolvency in 1871 due to personal liability for debts of a mining company of which he was a director (later quashed). In December 1878 he was forced to resign from the Medical Society of Victoria because of an offer to treat a New Zealand patient he had never seen.

Despite these eccentricities he was elected to provisional committee for the Austin Hospital for Incurables in 1880, which was then established in 1882. He was also appointed to Medical Board in 1883. He was a member of the Medical Board of Victoria from 1883 until his death. In the seventies he was known to have one of the finest collections of original paintings in Melbourne. He also bought property at Sorrento on the Mornington Peninsula, which he renamed Blairgowrie, from which the region has taken its name.

He died in 1887 after a short illness and is buried in Melbourne General Cemetery.

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Principal source: Ann Mitchell, "The Hospital South of the Yarra", 1977.

Draft by Allan Mawdsley

