

Balls-Headley, Walter (1841-1918)

Walter Balls-Headley (1841-1918), gynaecologist, was born on 27 August 1841 at Stapleford, Cambridgeshire, England, son of William Balls and his wife Rebecca, née Emson. In early professional life he assumed the additional surname of Headley and it is as Balls-Headley that he is remembered. From a preparatory school near Hitchin, Hertfordshire, he went to Clapham Grammar School under Rev. Charles Pritchard, later an eminent astronomer. In 1858 Balls-Headley was admitted to Peterhouse, Cambridge (B.A., 1862; M.B., 1864; M.A., 1865; Ch.M., 1865; M.D., 1868). His medical studies were undertaken at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, and St Bartholomew's, London (M.R.C.P., 1866; F.R.C.P., 1888). He held resident appointments at St Bartholomew's and Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, London. In 1866, as travelling physician to the marquess of Bute, he made an extensive journey through Palestine and Syria, during which he developed pulmonary tuberculosis. His health improved after a sojourn in the Channel Islands and he decided to emigrate to Australia, reaching Melbourne in 1868 before proceeding to Queensland.

Balls-Headley first settled in the favourable climate of Warwick, Queensland, and in 1875 moved to Melbourne, where he practised in Collins Street East. He was admitted to the University of Melbourne (M.D. *ad eund.*, 1876). In 1878 he was physician at the Alfred Hospital and in 1878-1900 at the Women's Hospital, Melbourne, an institution with which he was closely associated until his retirement from honorary hospital work. In 1889-1900 he was lecturer in obstetric medicine and diseases of women and children in the University of Melbourne, all its medical students again coming under his supervision in the wards of the Women's Hospital. Indeed, it was his failure to be re-elected to the hospital staff in 1891 which led to the hospital's acceptance of the university lecturer as an *ex officio* member of the staff with clinical rights. He was also an examiner in his specialities in the University of Adelaide.

In the 1890s Balls-Headley, tall, courteous and scholarly, was probably the leading gynaecologist in Melbourne and occupied an important position in Australian medicine. He was president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1889; president of the section of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Intercolonial Medical Congress in Sydney in 1892; and a vice-president of the British Gynaecological Society of London in 1897 and 1898. A prominent Freemason, he was grand master of the Masonic order in Victoria in 1905-07. In 1876 he published *Dress, With Reference to Heat*, a lecture to the Australian Health Society. He also wrote two medical works. *On Internal Tumours: Their Characteristic Distinctions and Diagnosis* (Melbourne, 1876) was the first major gynaecological study published in Australia. *The Evolution of the Diseases of Women* (London, 1894) was illustrated by his former pupil Dr Clara Stone, one of Melbourne's first women medical graduates. The originality of this second work, which stressed the influence of civilization and of psychological factors on diseases of women, led to an invitation to write the article, 'The etiology of diseases of the female genital organs', in T. C. Allbutt and W. S. Playfair (eds), *A System of Gynaecology* (London, 1896). A lucid and thoughtful writer, his contributions to gynaecological literature were well received by the profession both in Australia and Britain. Balls-Headley had the reputation of a very neat operator. He performed the first successful Caesarean section at the Women's Hospital; the operation, on a single girl, was a great success and the baby was christened at the hospital, receiving an additional name of Balls-Headley after approval by the Ladies' Committee.

Balls-Headley had married Helen Elizabeth Mary, née Young. In 1907 he practised for a short time in Tavistock Square, London, and after two years at Bideford, Devon, he settled in 1913 at Miramichi, Procter, British Columbia, where he died without issue on 7 March 1918.

Last updated 10 February 2025.

Source: C Macdonald, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.3, 1969.



Ben - HIER