

Syme, Sir George Adlington (1859-1929)

Sir George Adlington Syme (1859-1929), surgeon, was born on 13 July 1859 at Sherwood, Nottinghamshire, England, son of George Alexander Syme, Baptist minister, and his wife Susanna, née Goodier. In 1863 his father brought the family to Melbourne, where his brothers David and Ebenezer had founded the *Age*, and worked as a journalist and editor of the *Leader* newspaper.

Educated at Wesley College and the University of Melbourne (M.B., 1881; B.Ch., 1882; M.S., 1888), George Adlington graduated with first-class honours and an exhibition, and became a resident medical officer at the Melbourne Hospital. After studying at King's College Hospital, London, he was made a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1885. He held appointments at the Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital, the Central London Throat and Ear Hospital and the Soho Hospital, receiving excellent testimonials from senior London surgeons.

In 1887 Syme returned to Melbourne and was appointed demonstrator and examiner in anatomy at the university, honorary pathologist to the Women's Hospital, editor of the *Intercolonial Medical Journal* and honorary surgeon to out-patients at the Melbourne Hospital. In 1889 he became surgeon to the Victorian police force and in 1890 acting professor of anatomy. In 1891 he was appointed honorary consultant surgeon to the Melbourne Dental Hospital and in 1893 honorary surgeon to in-patients at St Vincent's Hospital where, that year, he carried out the first successful removal of an intracranial meningioma in Australia.

On 10 May 1899 at St John's Anglican Church, Camberwell, Syme married English-born Mabel Berry (d.1931). He established his home and practice at 19 Collins Street, Melbourne. In 1903 Syme resigned from St Vincent's when he was appointed in-patient surgeon to the Melbourne Hospital. There he practised general surgery: his interests included abdominal surgery, ophthalmology, otolaryngology, neurosurgery and orthopaedics. The Melbourne was his first love: he was a student, resident, surgeon, consultant surgeon and finally president of that hospital.

A man of few words, he was known as 'Silent Syme'. Short and thickset, he was highly intelligent, but of dour expression. He spoke slowly, and precisely. Though not a humorous man, he appreciated humour in others. A member of the Repertory, Beefsteak and Wallaby clubs, he was interested in classics, theatre and bushwalking. Above all, he was a man of honesty and integrity, with a profound respect for ethics.

In 1914 Syme enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force with the rank of lieutenant-colonel and served with the 1st Australian General Hospital in Egypt. He was appointed surgeon consultant to the hospital ship *Gascon* which anchored off Gallipoli. Invalided back to Australia in 1916, after contracting septicaemia through operating, he was an active consultant to the Repatriation Commission and a member of the university council (1912-29). He retired from the Melbourne Hospital in 1919. In 1924 he chaired the Commonwealth royal commission on health.

Twice president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association (1908, 1919), chairman of the federal council (1922-29) and a vice-president of the parent body, Syme was knighted in 1924 on

retirement from practice. He was president of the Australasian Medical Congress (British Medical Association) in 1924-27. His crowning achievement came with the formation of the College of Surgeons of Australasia (Royal Australasian College of Surgeons) of which he became first president in 1927. His stability, judicial approach and wisdom made him a natural leader. In 1928 he was awarded an honorary LL.D. by the University of Wales and an honorary fellowship of the American College of Surgeons. Syme died of a cerebral haemorrhage at his Malvern home on 19 April 1929 and was buried in Brighton cemetery. His wife, three daughters and son survived him. A portrait by John Longstaff is held by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Melbourne.

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