

## Sir Charles Snodgrass Ryan (1853-1926)

Sir Charles Snodgrass Ryan (1853-1926), surgeon, was born on 20 September 1853 at Killeen station, Longwood, Victoria, second son of Charles Ryan, an Irish overlander from New South Wales who founded the stock and station firm of Ryan & Hammond, and his wife Marian, daughter of John Cotton. He was educated at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, began a medical course at the University of Melbourne (1870-72) and completed this at the University of Edinburgh (M.B., C.M., 1875).

Touring Europe, Ryan undertook postgraduate study in Bonn and Vienna. In Rome, he saw in the London *Times* an advertisement by the Turkish government for twenty military surgeons. Seeking adventure and experience, he returned to London, was interviewed at the Turkish embassy, and two days later was *en route* to Constantinople. In mid-1876 he served in the final stages of the Turko-Servian war and then in the Russo-Turkish campaign of 1877-78. He spent more than four months in the siege of Plevna (Pleven, Bulgaria), which led to his nickname 'Plevna', and finally at Erzeroum in Turkish Armenia, after the fall of which he became a Russian prisoner of war. For his war services he was decorated with the Turkish orders of the Osmanieh and the Medjidie and the War medal. Later he was to write of his experiences in *Under the Red Crescent* (London, 1897).

With this unusual background Charles Ryan returned to Melbourne in June 1878 and next year was elected to the honorary staff of the (Royal) Melbourne Hospital, serving actively as surgeon until his retirement in 1913, when he was appointed consulting surgeon. He also was honorary medical officer to the Children's Hospital, Carlton, in 1883-1913, then became consulting surgeon. As a clinician Charlie Ryan was said to have a retentive memory and shrewd judgement. He formed opinions quickly and carried them out rapidly; to some who did not know him, but not to those who did, his work at times could appear perfunctory, even superficial. His warm personality and his fairness made him admired and liked by all who worked with him and he had great influence. His strong sense of duty and his intolerance of deviousness or shirking was to lead to some unpopularity when he was chief medical officer to the Victorian Railways in 1903-24. He was not an easy man to hoodwink. Ryan was an active member of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association, president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1893 and a long-serving trustee of that body. He maintained his association with Turkey, serving for some years as its consul in Victoria.

Following his return to Melbourne in 1878 he was commissioned as captain, Volunteer Medical Service. Promotions followed and, as colonel, he was appointed in 1902 principal medical officer, Victoria, and in 1904 honorary physician to the governor-general. From 1911 his retirement as P.M.O. was deferred, and following the outbreak of World War I in 1914 he became assistant director of medical services, 1st Division, Australian Imperial Force. He sailed for Egypt in October and was appointed to Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood's staff. On landing at Gallipoli he faced an enemy whose country he had served nearly forty years before. In June 1915 he contracted enteric fever, was evacuated to Egypt and later to England. From July 1916 he served in London as consulting surgeon, medical headquarters staff, A.I.F., where he achieved a reputation for 'toughness' on medical boards. In August 1917 he was appointed honorary surgeon-general, Australian Military Forces, and

returned to Australia in May 1919. In July he was placed on the retired list with the rank of honorary major general. By this time he had received many honours, C.B. (1916), C.M.G. and K.B.E. (1919).

Like his grandfather John Cotton, Ryan was very interested in ornithology and photography. He was president (1905-07) of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union and enthusiastically supported bird protection, the introduction of nature study in schools and the holding of an annual Bird Day. This vital, cheerful and sociable man delighted in being a raconteur and enjoyed debate and discussion with his many friends.

On 5 July 1883, at Christ Church, Brunswick, Melbourne, Ryan had married Alice Elfrida, daughter of Theodotus John Sumner, merchant and politician. They joined a cluster of medical specialists who lived over their consulting rooms at the east end of Collins Street. They had two children, Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Sumner Ryan, D.S.O., C.M.G. (1884-1952), member of the House of Representatives in 1940-52, and Ethel Marian Sumner (Maie), author, artist and aviator and wife of Lord Casey, governor-general of Australia in 1965-69. Sir Charles Ryan died suddenly from cardiac failure on 23 October 1926 on board the *Otranto*, near Adelaide, while returning from Europe. He was buried in Melbourne general cemetery. Cecil Godfrey Ryan was a brother and the artist Ellis Rowan was a sister. A biography in Turkish, *A Former Ottoman Officer Among the ANZACs* by Fikret Yilmaz, appeared in 2015, followed by Geoff Page's *Plevna: A Biography in Verse*, in 2016.

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