

Fetherston, Richard Herbert Joseph (1864-1943)

Richard Herbert Joseph Fetherston (1864-1943), medical practitioner, was born on 2 May 1864 at the Melbourne Lying-in Hospital (now Royal Women's Hospital), son of Gerald Henry Fetherston (1829-1901), resident surgeon, and his wife Sarah Ellen, née Harvey, who had been matron. His father, born in County Roscommon, Ireland, had settled in Melbourne in 1860 after several years as a ship's surgeon.

'Bertie' Fetherston was educated at Wesley College and the Alma Road Grammar School. In 1881 he went to Dublin, where he was admitted as licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (1884) and licentiate in medicine and midwifery, King and Queen's College of Physicians in Ireland (1885). He then went to the University of Edinburgh where he graduated (M.B., Ch.M. 1886). His thesis for M.D. was accepted by that university in 1888 and he received the M.D., Melbourne (*ad eund*) the next year.

Returning to Melbourne in 1887, Fetherston joined his father in Prahran. However, he soon accepted appointment as resident medical officer at the Women's Hospital. His father was a member of the honorary staff there and when he retired in 1891, Fetherston succeeded him, serving until 1914 when he resigned to accept appointment as the first honorary gynaecologist to the (Royal) Melbourne Hospital. He retired from there in 1924. At both hospitals he was a successful clinical teacher and lecturer and was an examiner for the University of Melbourne. In 1891 he had recommenced working in Prahran. He took in a partner, R. N. Wawn, in 1911, started in Collins Street specializing in obstetrics and gynaecology the following year, and left the Prahran practice in 1913.

As had his father, Fetherston served Prahran well as medical officer and as local councillor. In 1921 he was elected to the Legislative Assembly, but found politics not to his liking and retired after defeat in 1924. He was also medical officer to the Blind and Deaf and Dumb asylums and to Wesley College. His many posts in the British Medical Association included president in 1911 of the Victorian branch, founder-member in 1912 of the federal committee, and director of the Australasian Medical Publishing Co. He remained a councillor of the Victorian branch and a trustee of the Medical Society of Victoria until his death—in 1935 he was elected a vice-president of the parent body when it held its annual meeting in Melbourne, a signal honour. He was a fellow of the College of Surgeons of Australasia (1927).

Fetherston's contributions were perhaps greatest in the military sphere. He was gazetted surgeon with the relative rank of captain in the Victorian Militia in 1887 and had attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel at the outbreak of World War I. He volunteered for active service but on 15 August 1914 was appointed director-general of medical services, based in Melbourne, with the task of raising the medical service for the Australian Imperial Force. In 1915 he made a tour of inspection and reorganization of the Australian Army Medical Corps, visiting Egypt, Gallipoli and England. He was promoted major general in 1916 and made another inspection tour in 1918. He was retired at his own request shortly after the end of the war.

Despite a meagre staff, small salary and frustration at not being released for active service, Fetherston worked with remarkable energy and enthusiasm. Official historian A. G. Butler paid tribute to his

'absolute impartiality' and wholehearted devotion to duty. Fetherston had urged the appointment of (Sir) Neville Howse as director-general of medical services overseas and continued to support him, though obliged to implement government policies such as acceptance of lower standards of fitness for recruits, which Howse strenuously opposed. Major General Rupert Downes remembered Fetherston's decisiveness, hatred of humbug, and fearlessness 'both moral and physical'.

Fetherston was short, compact in build, and bearded. Imperturbable and shrewd, he was ready to give sound advice and sensible help. He was a follower of outdoor sports and a member of the Melbourne Cricket and Victoria Racing clubs. On 4 July 1894 he had married Victoria Amelia Gourlay at South Yarra Presbyterian Church. He died at his St Kilda home on 3 June 1943, survived by two sons and a daughter. He is remembered by the medical profession by the triennial Fetherston Memorial Lecture on a subject relating to maternal welfare.

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