

## Russell, Robert Hamilton (1860-1933)

Robert Hamilton Russell (1860-1933), surgeon, was born on 3 September 1860 at Farningham, Kent, England, youngest son of James **Russell**, farmer, and his wife Ellen, née Phillips. Educated at Nassau School, Barnes, near London, he entered the medical school of King's College Hospital in 1878 (M.R.C.S., 1882; L.R.C.P., 1886). He was chosen as dresser and then house surgeon to (Lord) Lister, an encounter which was to have profound and lasting effects on Russell's career. In 1884-85 he was house surgeon at the Salop Infirmary, Shrewsbury, before moving to the Continent to continue his training. He returned to England in 1889 with a lung complaint (possibly tuberculosis), became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (London) and prepared to leave for Melbourne, for the sake of his health. He arrived in 1890 and on 2 May was registered to practise medicine in the colony of Victoria.

Later that year Russell commenced general practice at Hawthorn, but without great financial success as Victoria was in the grip of economic depression. During this period he became family doctor to the Grainger family and as a result became a lifelong friend of Percy Grainger, with whom he shared a love of music.

Eager to return to surgery, Russell was appointed in 1892 surgeon at the (Royal) Children's Hospital and also assistant anatomy demonstrator at the University of Melbourne, appointments which provided him with wider professional and research opportunities. In 1901 he was offered a position at the Alfred Hospital where he remained until 1919 except for eighteen months with the British Expeditionary Force as a surgeon, serving first in England at base hospitals and subsequently in France. He returned to the Alfred and continued his association with war victims, taking charge of the military hospitals located in St Kilda Road, and Kooyong Road, Caulfield.

In 1920 Russell was reappointed to the Children's Hospital for five years. That year he founded the Victorian Association of Surgeons, which was later to disband with the formation of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, of which he was an inaugural member (1927). He was to serve on the college council from its inception, holding the post of director-general from 1928 until his death. He was active in professional organizations, held in high esteem by his colleagues, and had been elected president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1903. As a mark of his international recognition he received an honorary fellowship of the American College of Surgeons in 1926.

Russell's clinical and research interests ranged over a wide area of adult and paediatric surgery and his painstaking preparation for difficult cases enabled him to achieve remarkable successes. He initially promulgated the congenital origin of inguinal hernia in the late 1890s and established that the minimal treatment was removal of the hernial sac without other forms of repair. This approach led him into conflict with many authorities at the time, but for children's hernias at least his theory is still supported today. He was widely regarded as an expert in the management of fractures and developed a system of balanced traction for the management of femoral fractures that is still in use. His other innovations included the first thoracotomy for removal of a foreign body in the lung, reported in the *Lancet* in 1905; the excision of a hydatid cyst; the use of cadaveric bone grafts, and improved procedures for the management of urethral stricture and hypospadias. These contributions are all recorded in his collected *Papers and Addresses in Surgery* (1923).

Russell was tall and handsome, well-spoken and urbane with a distinguished bearing, but not arrogant in his relationships. He was admired by his patients for his kindness and regarded with the greatest affection by his students and colleagues alike. In addition to his surgical accomplishments, he was a fine and sensitive pianist—Percy Grainger recollected him as 'the first exquisite pianist in my life'—well known in the music world of Melbourne and Europe.

As a mark of respect Russell was presented with his portrait by George Lambert at the annual general meeting of the college in 1930. He died in the (Royal) Melbourne Hospital, from injuries received in a motor car accident, on 30 April 1933, one month before the official opening of the Alfred Hospital's intermediate wing of Hamilton Russell House. Russell remained a bachelor all his life. He was cremated and the remains returned to England. A bronze bust by Paul Montford is at the Alfred Hospital and a life mask is preserved in the Australian Institute of Anatomy collection, Canberra.

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