

Gilbee, William (1825-1885)

William Gillbee (1825-1885), surgeon, was born in Hackney, London, son of William Gillbee, probably a captain in the Duke of Wellington's regiment, and his wife Sarah, née Ward, a beauty in the court of the Duke of Clarence. His father died about 1832 and his mother married Bracee Uppington Barfoot. In 1836 she took her family to Van Diemen's Land as assisted migrants. William remained at school in Edinburgh and in 1844 entered the university medical school. He won high praise from his teachers, Sir John Goodsir, Sir Robert Christison, James Miller and Sir James Simpson. In 1847 he left Edinburgh for London where he studied at Guy's Hospital (M.R.C.S., 1848). In November 1849 he sailed as surgeon in the *Windermere* for Hobart Town. His letters show that his family reunion was not happy and in April 1850 as surgeon in the *Raven* he left for California. He fossicked at the goldfields for fifteen months and then returned to Britain for postgraduate training at Edinburgh in 1851-52, again with Sir James Simpson.

Gillbee returned to Victoria in the *Georgiana* in 1852. The crew mutinied at Corio and the captain and Gillbee narrowly escaped death. He opened a practice in Collins Street East and, with his thorough training and obvious ability, he rose rapidly in his profession. He was elected an honorary surgeon to the Melbourne Hospital in January 1854 and was the first in the colony to perform several types of major operations. Prominent in the Medical Society of Victoria, he was its president in 1863. He had helped to found the medical school in the University of Melbourne and became an examiner in surgery in 1862. He was first president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association in 1879. A bachelor of genial character and large stature, he was a noted member of the Melbourne, Athenaeum and Yorick Clubs, and as vice-president of the Royal Society of Victoria helped to plan the Burke and Wills expedition. He was the first assistant surgeon to the Volunteer Force in 1853, became surgeon major in 1867 and later principal medical officer.

Gillbee was senior surgeon at the Melbourne Hospital in 1867 when Joseph Lister announced his principles of antiseptic surgery. Gillbee was the first to apply and advocate these methods in Australasia. In 1868 he published 'On the treatment of abscess and compound fracture by Mr. Lister's new method' in the *Australian Medical Journal* and championed the cause of antisepsis in the 1870s before the principle was accepted generally. In 1875 he was not re-elected by the subscribers to the honorary staff of the Melbourne Hospital. In sympathy, a meeting of 'professional gentlemen' was held to 'protest against injustice and ingratitude on the part of the public'. His colleagues persuaded him to remain on the committee of management and he was elected its president in 1882, but soon had to resign when a recent graduate, James Barrett (1862-1945), complained of his interference in the management of a patient. A chronic chest complaint undoubtedly contributed to his loss of status and his depression in his last years. In 1883-84 he travelled in New Zealand and England; six weeks after his return he died aged 60 on 4 January 1885. He was buried in the Melbourne general cemetery after an Anglican service, and left an estate of £31,000. His bequest of £1000 to the National Gallery of Victoria for sending an artist to England to paint a picture of Australian historical interest resulted in Emanuel Phillips Fox's 'Landing of Captain Cook', and John Longstaff's 'The Arrival of Burke and Wills at Cooper's Creek'. David O'Sullivan, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.4, 1972.



WILLIAM GILLBEE.