

Robertson, James (1822 – 1893)

James Robertson MA, MD, LicRCSed., was born in Newmill, Keith, North Britain, on the 10th June 1822. In 1843 he commenced the study of Medicine at King's College, Aberdeen, and gained high commendation from his teachers. Professor Redfern testified that in the study of Anatomy, both theoretic and practical, he deservedly occupied the highest position among his fellow-students. Afterwards, in the University of Aberdeen and at the Royal Infirmary, he obtained like distinction, being especially noted for his diligent attention to practical pathology. Already a Master of Arts in the University of Aberdeen, he became Doctor of Medicine in his alma mater in the year 1847, and about the same time was admitted a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Largely at the insistence of Sir John Forbes, Dr. Robertson commenced the practice of his profession in Fettercairn, Kincardineshire, where he remained six years. His work lay partly in the estates of the late Sir John Gladstone, some of whose descendants were long afterwards under his care at the other side of the world.

Arriving in Melbourne by the ship "Statesman," in October 1853, Dr. Robertson was almost immediately appointed Honorary Physician to the Benevolent Asylum and acted in that capacity for seven years. In 1858 he became Honorary Physician to the Melbourne Hospital and remained in that office for nearly twenty-nine years. He was an active member of the Medical Society of Victoria and took a deep interest in the foundation of the Medical School in the University of Melbourne.

In the early history of the Medical Society, Dr. Robertson occupied a prominent place. His earliest contribution to its proceedings was a paper on "Rupture of the Diaphragm", read at the June meeting in 1859. In the December following he submitted another on "Tumour of the Brain," and in July 1861 he analysed the vital statistics of the Benevolent Asylum. He acted for some time as Honorary Secretary of the Society, but ethical difficulties led to his resignation of office and his retirement from the Society. In fact the Society was almost extinct at the end of 1861. The Australian Medical Journal kept it from perishing, and in this Journal in August and October 1868 Dr. Robertson published a series of letters on the nature of disease in Victoria. In 1880 he rejoined the Medical Society, and was elected President for the following year. His published writings of later date include the Presidential Address (Australian Medical Journal, January 1882); "Is Phthisis Pulmonalis Contagious?" (Australian Medical Journal, October and November 1886); "Koch's Cure for Consumption" (Australian Medical Journal, November 1890); and "Koch's Treatment of Tuberculosis" (Australian Medical Journal, February 1891). He took an active part in the work of the Second Session of the Intercolonial Medical Congress which met in Melbourne in January 1889, being a member of the Organisation Committee, and reading papers on "The History of Typhoid Fever in Victoria and its Etiology," and on "The Importance of the Constitutional Factor in Disease."

In 1864, he was elected the first Lecturer on Theory and Practice of Medicine in the nascent School and continued till his resignation at the beginning of 1882. Three years later, in 1885, he was elected a member of the University Council and was a constant attendant till his last illness. The most important public work of Dr. Robertson was in the Medical School, and in the Melbourne Hospital. The inaugural address which he delivered at the outset of the lectures on Medicine is published in the

Australian Medical Journal of April 1865. He continued in this chair for seventeen years. As an Examiner, he demanded a high standard of attainment.

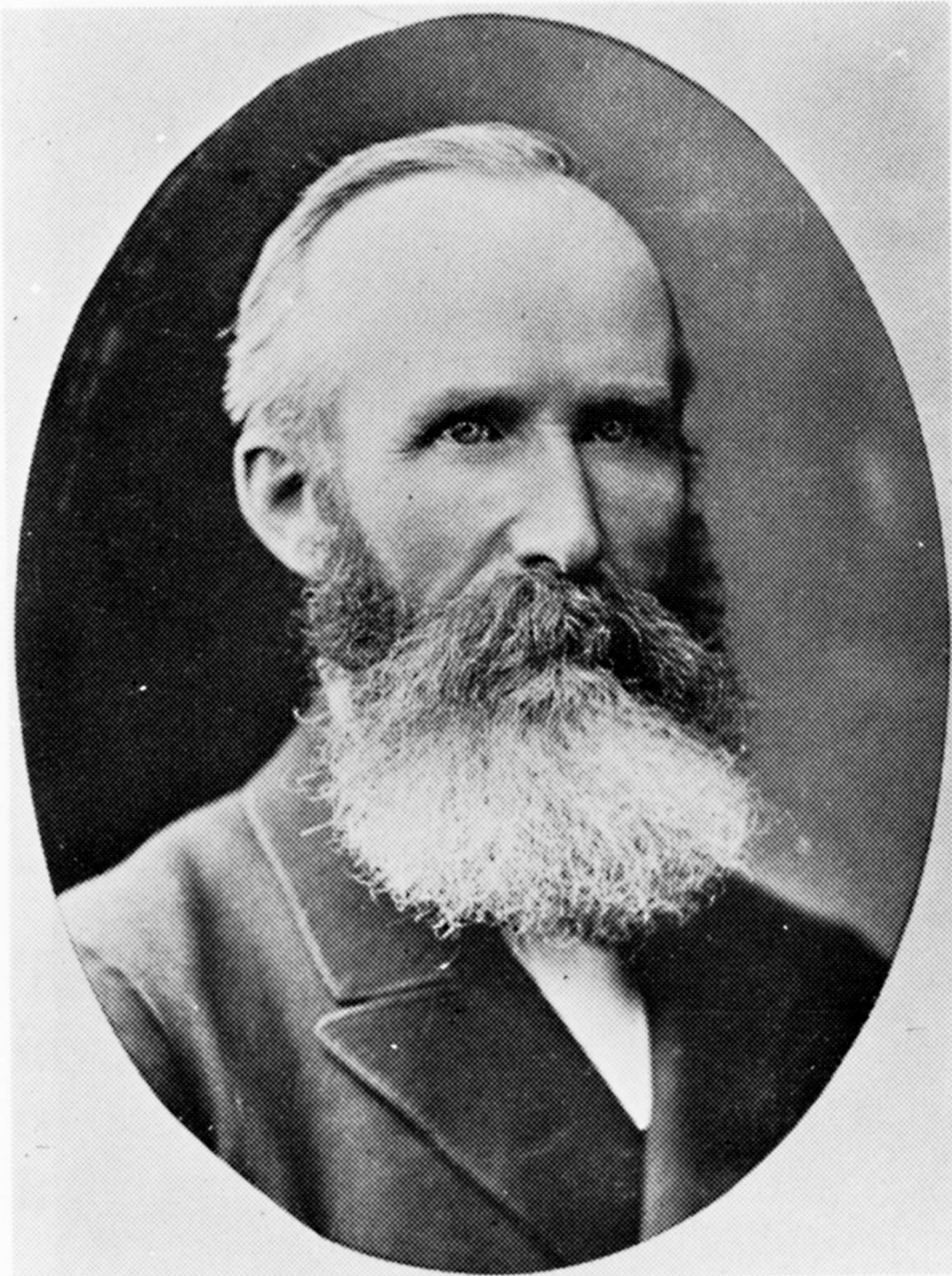
Dr. Robertson was also for some years a member of the Central Board of Health. He was an Honorary Physician to the Melbourne Hospital from 1858 to 1887. He then became a Consulting Physician to the Hospital, and the Staff unanimously invited him to act as their Chairman.

Until June 1892 he was, for the most part, able to perform his professional duties, but then an attack of bronchitis and asthma was followed by pronounced heart failure with dropsy. From this, however, he rallied to some degree and was able to attend the Medical Congress in Sydney early in August. A painful throat affection subsequently developed, and on November 17th tracheotomy became necessary. The urgent symptoms were thus relieved, but strength gradually waned, and death took place on 21st January 1893.

Last updated 16 May 2025.

Main source: Obituary, Australian Medical Journal, 15 Feb 1893, p.88.

Compiled by Allan Mawdsley.



James Robertson, the first lecturer on the theory and practice of medicine.