

Jamieson, James (1840-1916)

James Jamieson (1840-1916), medical practitioner, university teacher and health officer, was born on 5 June 1840 at Beith, Ayrshire, Scotland, youngest of seven children of William Jamieson, furniture manufacturer, and his wife Anne, née Scott. Educated at the local parish school and at an academy at Glasgow, James knew French and German and from 1858 studied medicine at the University of Glasgow (M.D., 1862; C.M., 1863), where Joseph Lister, the pioneer of antisepsis, taught surgery.

After travelling to Australia and New Zealand as a ship's doctor, Jamieson worked as a general practitioner back in Scotland and held part-time appointments as a parochial medical officer and public vaccinator. In 1868 he moved to Warrnambool, Victoria, where his brother William was a businessman. James started a practice and was health officer to the municipality and honorary medical officer at the hospital. Next year he was registered and the first of his many contributions to the press, 'Is alcohol a food?' appeared in the *Colonial Monthly*. In 1874 at Warrnambool he married Jane Pringle Hood with Presbyterian forms. They were to have five children.

When opinion was still uncertain about the origin and means of transmission of infectious disease, Jamieson promoted germ theory, better hygiene and the use of disinfectants. He believed also in quarantine for epidemic diseases and the compulsory isolation of the sick. His essay 'On the Parasitic Theory of Disease', an up-to-date summary of the work of Pasteur, Lister and others, published in the *Australian Medical Journal* in 1876, helped to swing professional opinion in favour of germ theory. A 'popular' version was published in the *Melbourne Review* in July 1877. An inaugural member in 1875 of the influential Australian Health Society founded by Martha Turner, he contributed extensively to the society's lecture programme, organization and publications.

In 1877 Jamieson moved to Melbourne. He was honorary physician in the outpatient department of the Melbourne Hospital in 1879-84, then joined the senior staff at the Alfred Hospital, retiring in 1908. In 1885 he succeeded T. M. Girdlestone as health officer of the City of Melbourne amidst a developing sanitary crisis. Jamieson's reports to the health committee and the town clerk Edmund FitzGibbon included perceptive discussions of the public health and changing social conditions in the city and inner suburbs. His *Typhoid Fever in Melbourne* (1887) appeared in one of the two worst years for the incidence of this disease. Economic depression in the 1890s, large-scale sanitary engineering and reform of public health administration helped to resolve the crisis, reducing local government's role. Subsequently he worked effectively with the chief medical officer D. A. Gresswell to have tubercular cattle removed from the milk supply in the 1890s. Jamieson retired in 1912, the city's last part-time health officer.

He had lectured at the University of Melbourne (M.D. *ad eundem gradum*, 1878) in obstetrics and diseases of women and children in 1879-87, and in the theory and practice of medicine in 1887-1908. According to K. F. Russell, Jamieson had a 'Scottish thoroughness at the bedside in his own inimitable way', and was at his best teaching clinical medicine—upon his retirement his students endowed a prize in this subject. He has sometimes been depicted as anti-feminist, for wanting women taught in separate classes, but his daughter Margaret graduated (M.B., 1906; B.S., 1907), and practised at Euroa.

Jamieson publicized what could be done to reduce maternal and infant morbidity and mortality through the control of perinatal infection in the mother and proper feeding of the children. In his writings, he made effective use of official statistics to argue for action to control typhoid, tuberculosis, puerperal fever and high infant mortality, with his *Contributions to the Vital Statistics of Australia* (1882) an example. His other outlets included the *Australian Medical Journal* (editor 1883-87), *Melbourne Review*, *Victorian Review*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Argus*, *Age* and *Australasian*.

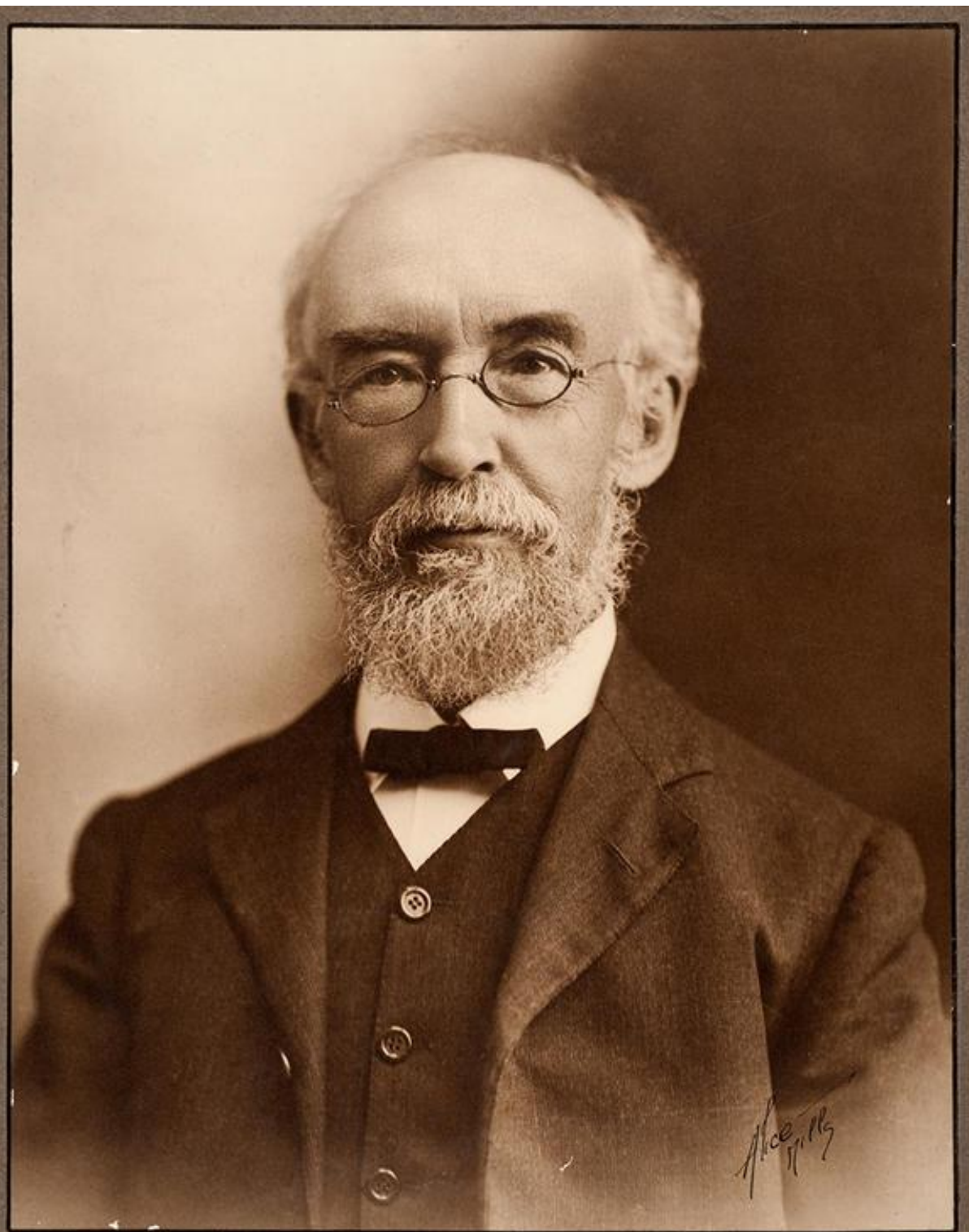
Active in the Royal Society of Victoria, Jamieson served a term as president. He was also president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1886, but was not part of the medical establishment. He never joined the Melbourne Club and was a critic of sanitary conditions and practices at the Melbourne Hospital. His opposition to the system of election of senior staff to hospitals was well known. It was a scandal that when he taught midwifery at the university he had no access to the wards or patients of the Lying-In Hospital, as he could not get elected to the staff. In 1890 he took leave and travelled to Britain and Europe, attending the International Medical Congress in Berlin, as did Pasteur and Koch.

A photograph taken in later life showed 'Wee Jimmy' as balding and bespectacled, but dapper and alert, in bow tie, waistcoat and jacket. From 1907 he progressively divested himself of public and professional responsibilities. Jamieson died on 1 August 1916 and was buried in Kew cemetery. His wife, one son and two daughters survived him.

Last updated 28 February 2025.

Source: David Dunstan, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Suppl.Vol., 2005.

Draft compiled by Allan Mawdsley.



JAMES JAMIESON
— PRESIDENT 1886 —