

THE SETTLERS' GUIDE or Modern Domestic Medicine and Surgery
DR WILLIAM BELL (1815-1871) MRCS Lon LM Dub

William BELL, medical practitioner, coroner and vaccinator, was born in Newry, Ireland, the son of Edward Bell, haberdasher and his wife Eliza Johnston. He took his M.R.C.S. at the Royal College of Surgeons, London, his L.M at Dublin and was formerly a member of the Medico Chirurgical Society, Dublin.ⁱ

He married Margaret Georgina Barnewall, [Barnewell], daughter of Thomas Barnewall and Francis Whitson at Dublin in 1835. Their first child, Eliza Matilda was born in Newry, Ireland in 1838.ⁱⁱ

Bell then obtained the position of Surgeon-Superintendent on board the "Hero of Malown" a ship of 482 tons which, in November 1838, sailed from Liverpool to Sydney. On embarkation, his family consisted of his wife Margaret, and daughter Eliza. On arrival, in March 1839, he now had two daughters, as Georgina Sophia had been born on the very rough voyage out.ⁱⁱⁱ

After practising briefly in Sydney, Bell moved to Parramatta having bought the stock-in-trade of a shop in the township.^{iv} This proved to be a disaster as he had unwittingly bought the goods at the beginning of a crippling colony-wide recession.^v A great number of people of all persuasions became insolvent during these years, and, in January of 1841, Bell was among them.^{vi} It became a very unpleasant time for the young Doctor when insolvency was still punished by incarceration pending the insolvent's affairs being put in order. Only twelve months later Sir William Burton instigated a new Insolvent Law which made this mediaeval practice used in the Colony only where fraud was suspected.^{vii} After Bells release from gaol the following June, he returned to Sydney where he briefly practiced as a surgeon, having submitted the necessary testimonials of Qualification to Practice to the NSW Medical Board.^{viii}

Preferring a country practice, Bell moved to Windsor in 1842 and commenced his medical work. His family increased rapidly, not so his income. His first son, Edward Thomas,^{ix} was born and was soon followed by Mary Susan^x, Susan Mary,^{xi} William Barnewall^{xii} and Augusta Henrietta,^{xiii} seven children in all. Susan was Bell's sister's name.

Having been made personally and painfully aware of the depressed state of monetary affairs in the Colony, he advertised a reduction in his 'hitherto moderate charges'. It was to be understood, he said, a temporary measure only during the 'bad times', and he noted that he would treat labourers, tradesmen and their families gratuitously, but medicine was to be paid for.^{xiv} He also advertised in 1843 that he had a supply of a genuine vaccine virus to vaccinate a limited number of children weekly. This was a lifelong passion of his, one he wrote about later and one which he continued to practice until shortly before his death in 1871.^{xv}

Soon Bell's medical practice had built up accounts unpaid by a number of patients, many of whom had moved on to unknown addresses. Consequently, in 1845, he was forced into a second insolvency. He owned no property and his personal assets were £20.^{xvi} He offered his services gratuitously to the Hawkesbury Benevolent Hospital and served until 1850 as Assistant Surgeon and Medical Officer.^{xvii} In 1848 the family moved to John Howe's house in Thompson Square, Windsor. It was there that he continued his practice and wrote "**THE SETTLERS GUIDE**" or **MODERN DOMESTIC MEDICINE AND SURGERY**".

This book arose from Bell's observation of the need to help the many settlers who lived out in the bush, and who were far away from medical assistance. Not one to limit himself on his subject, "**THE SETTLERS GUIDE**" eventually consisted of 85,000 well chosen words. On

THE SETTLERS' GUIDE or Modern Domestic Medicine and Surgery completion, in November 1849 he advertised in the Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser^{xviii} that it was shortly to be published and requested that intending subscribers send their names to him. He was clearly hoping that the publication would help his ever perilous financial state by requesting payment in advance of publication.

For two years Bell as Assistant Surgeon, and Dr Dowe as medical attendant, had worked together gratuitously for the Windsor Benevolent Society Hospital.^{xix} Dr Dowe was also the Coroner from 1843-1860,^{xx} but for some time he and Bell had been working together in increasing disharmony.^{xxi}

Bell's last child, William Barnewall, had just been born at Windsor,^{xxii} and between the ongoing and increasing friction at the Benevolent Hospital, and another mouth to feed, things needed to change urgently. It was clear that the number of patients in the Windsor district could not support a doctor with seven children under the age of twelve. Bell decided to move the family to Carcoar which was then in need of a medical man.

Carcoar was at that time the second most populous town west of the Blue Mountains. Its first medical man, Dr Robert Rogers, tragically drowned in December 1849, leaving his wife and four small children destitute. Rogers was on his way to visit a patient who lived on the other side of the flooded Lachlan River. The crossing at Nanami Falls, near Eugowra, was very dangerous and it was surmised later that his horse fell into the river giving Rogers a fatal blow to the temple.^{xxiii} Bell had known Rogers from an earlier time and had, when he had first arrived in the Colony, written to the Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser and given a favourable view of Rogers treatment of a patient who had died in the Sydney Gaol.^{xxiv}

The proposed move to Carcoar was a problem as Bell still had debts in Windsor and, in particular, owed rent. To allow himself to move on unencumbered, he was able to borrow money to cover the debts, but under very stringent conditions. The main one being that the newly completed "**THE SETTLERS GUIDE or MODERN DOMESTIC MEDICINE AND SURGERY**" was to be held by a Windsor solicitor as collateral for the loan. When Bell handed it over in the solicitor's office, it was the last time he saw it. The manuscript stayed unclaimed and buried in the solicitor's papers for more than one hundred and sixty years.^{xxv}

In January 1850 Bell and his family arrived in Carcoar. He was greeted with much acclaim by many of the local inhabitants.^{xxvi} Shortly afterwards he advertised that he would put a limited number of beds in the Old Court House for the use of sick people from the interior until a hospital could be built.^{xxvii} He also intended to establish a dispensary there at which he would give gratuitous advice twice weekly.^{xxviii}

He soon established his medical practice in the Old Courthouse, and was enjoying the social life of the town. It was reported that during the course of one week, in addition to his normal surgical and medical duties, he had given evidence to the Coroner on the death of a child, removed a bone from the throat of a shepherd who had accidentally swallowed it in some cabbage, and attended an accident caused by a runaway horse.^{xxix}

Then, a few short months later, gold was discovered outside Bathurst at Ophir. Soon there were more than 1700 men in that district, mad with gold fever.^{xxx} By December Bell, still at Carcoar, was forced to advertise that he would give gratuitous advice to all classes of patients at his residence and that those future charges for his professional attendance on individuals or families would be extremely moderate.^{xxxi}

Carcoar became almost deserted. The local Post Mistress gave up her duties to become a midwife, babies being a growth industry.^{xxxii} Bell earned £1.11.6 giving committal evidence against three dangerous lunatics.^{xxxiii}

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Of concern for the future was the possible resumption of the transportation of convicts to the colony. Squatters had become very wealthy through acquiring huge land grants, or cheap leases with the use of free convict labour. Successive governments had worked on the principle of 'To those that have, shall be given'. Now the squatters were being forced to use poorly paid labour, but due to the gold rush, they could not get men for even generous wages, consequently, they were pushing hard for the resumption of transportation. At a public meeting Bell moved for forming an Anti-Transportation Association for the Town and District of Carcoar and was elected to the committee.^{xxxiv}

With his practice ever diminishing, Bell decided that he had to branch out, and by following his patients to the gold rush and leaving Carcoar, he became only the second medical man to practice in the district of Orange. He advertised in June 1851, that he intended to establish a temporary hospital in the township. This would be located at Mr Paisley's Inn, The Coach and Horses, on the first four days of the week until a permanent residence could be built in the township. He would also visit the diggings professionally on two or three days a week.^{xxxv}

The diggings provided a constant stream of patients, and as gold was discovered in ever widening areas, some fields became worked out, while others briefly boomed. Bell's practice, often on horseback, was wide-reaching. A frequent duty reported in the newspapers of the day was to appear before the Coroner to give evidence of post mortems he had performed on victims of accidents, drownings and murders.

By 1851, Sofala on the Turon River had more than 2000 miners working in the district and a place in the town had been set aside for a Court of Petty Sessions.^{xxxvi} It was noted that the homes being built in the township were substantial for a gold town and soon there were nine Public Houses.^{xxxvii} By 1852 there were two good schools, one run by the Church of England, the other being in the Wesleyan Chapel.^{xxxviii} Bell began working there, treating patients and using his well-honed skills performing post mortems. To supplement his income in 1855 he became the Post Master at Sofala,^{xxxix} and continued to perform his medical duties about the gold fields.

In 1857 he became a Coroner.^{xl} Bell had first applied for this position in 1848 when he was living in Windsor.^{xli} Steady government employment, if only for £20 per annum enabled him to move the family to Picton, where he was to be Coroner in addition to Campbelltown and Liverpool. This put him within reach of a growing township, with more clients. Bell expanded his horizons, rented and furnished a house, and bought clothes befitting his position in society. He bought a piano forte for the parlour, books for his young ladies, ran up accounts, and when unable to pay them, gave promissory notes.^{xlii}

His daughters made new friends and, in 1857 Eliza Matilda Bell married William John Cordeaux, son of William Cordeaux, an early land commissioner.^{xliii} In 1860, Mary Susan Bell married William John Antill, 3rd son of Henry Colden Antill, Magistrate of Picton.^{xliv}

Bell was writing again and published an essay entitled "The Wear and Tear on Human Life"^{xlv} and another entitled "On the Origins, Progress and Treatment of Smallpox."^{xlvi} He gave lectures and the family participated in the social life of the district, but by 1860 his practice had deteriorated and he became insolvent for the third time.^{xlvii} On examination, he explained that the healthy state of Campbelltown had made a big difference to his income, and he had failed to sell his practice to cover his debts. Even so he was still able to perform his duties as Coroner until 1863, although the small salary did little to help his financial problems.

The family then moved on to Sydney, and in 1864 Bell was made Vaccinator for the District of Sydney and paid 2/6 for every successful case.^{xlviii} His unmarried daughters were to meet their husbands there. In 1868 Georgina Sophia Bell married John Cruickshank, a Scottish

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 doctor who was assistant surgeon on H.M.S. Brisk.^{xlix} In the same year Augusta Henrietta
 married John James Frushard Bell, another Scot who was a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy.¹ In
 1869 Susan Mary married Edward Liardet, a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, serving on H.M.S.
 Virago.^{li}

With all of his daughters comfortably married and grand children coming along, life at
 last should have been less stressful, but his previous debts continued to dog him wherever he
 went and in 1864 he became insolvent for the fourth time.^{lii} He practiced in Kent, Jamison and
 Pitt Streets, while living in Ashfield, but despite his best endeavours he was forced to become
 insolvent for the fifth and final time in August 1871.^{liii} His ill-health had caused a reduction to the
 income from his practice and then a Bill of Sale was executed. This final blow resulted in the sale
 of his horse and carriage, furniture, and all of his other effects to the amount of £350.

By this time Bell's health was very poor with disease of the lungs. His doctors wrote to
 the examiners of his insolvency that the state of his health was most precarious and that unless
 medical treatment was assisted by a change of air and climate, speedy fatal results could be
 expected. They recommended that he should be removed at once from all matters of business and
 all sources of anxiety and that his speedy departure to a warmer climate, with the advantage if
 possible of a sea voyage, should be allowed.

Too ill to take the sea voyage, he returned to Picton where he died a little more than two
 months later on the 7th November 1871, aged 56. His wife Margaret outlived him by another
 twenty-three years.

Notes

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- i Ross Davies Free Pages Genealogy Rootsweb Ancestry.com
 - ii Settlers Guide or Modern Medicine and Surgery
 - iii BDM NSW Baptism 1839/2194 Vol 47
 - iv Sydney Gazette 15 January 1840 p.3
 - v Chronicle of Australia p.249, 254
 - vi SRNSW Supreme Court Insolvency Cause Papers. Neilson V Bell 5/4641
 - vii Sydney Gazette 5 February 1842 p.2. Summary of the new Insolvent Law written by Sir William Burton.
 - viii Sydney Morning Herald 23 November 1842 p.2
 - ix BDM NSW V18412195
 - x BDM NSW V1845241
 - xi BDM NSW V1845242
 - xii BDM NSW V1849726
 - xiii BDM NSW V1847725
 - xiv Windsor Express 5 October 1843 p.1
 - xv Windsor Express 19 October p.1
 - xvi SRNSW Supreme Court Insolvency Cause Papers. 2/8797 1481
 - xvii Hawkesbury Benevolent Society Papers. ML. R CY881, A625, A626 p.431, 505-506
 - xviii Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 28 November 1849 p.3
 - xix Hawkesbury Benevolent Society Papers. ML R CY881, A625, p.505-506
 - xx Early Days of Windsor N.S. Wales. James Steele. p.140
 - xxi Hawkesbury Benevolent Society Papers. ML.R CY881, A624, p.339-340
 - xxii BMD 1849/726
 - xxiii Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 8 December 1849 p.4
 - xxiv Sydney Monitor & Commercial Advertiser 29 Jun 1839 p.2
 - xxv Beddek & Coley Legal Records ML MSS 2380, Y4564
 - xxvi Bathurst Free Press 12 February 1850 p.5
 - xxvii Bathurst Free Press 16 February 1850 p.5

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xxviii	Bathurst Free Press 11 May 1850 p.5
xxix	Bathurst Free Press 11 May 1850 p.5
xxx	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 17 May 1851 p.4
xxxi	Bathurst Free Press 21 December 1850 p.5
xxxii	Bathurst Free Press 26 January 1851 p.5
xxxiii	State Records Colonial Secretary's Papers 4/4924 No 51/655
xxxiv	Bathurst Free Press 15 March 1851 p.7
xxxv	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 14 Jun 1851 p.4
xxxvi	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 8 Aug 1851 p.4
xxxvii	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 17 March 1852 p.4
xxxviii	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 12 Jun 1852 p.4
xxxix	Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser 27 October 1852 p.3
xl	Returns of the Colony "Blue Books" 1857
xli	State Records Colonial Secretary's Papers 4/2806.2 No 48/8196
xlii	State Records Insolvency Records 1860. 2/8993 4819
xliii	BDM NSW 1857/1611
xliv	BDM NSW 1860/1491
xlv	Mitchell Library ML 86/152
xlvi	Mitchell Library ML 042 p.466
xlvii	State Records Insolvency Records 2/8993 4819
xlviii	State Records Public Service Lists 1868-1869
xlix	BDM NSW 1868/774
l	BDM NSW 1868/788
li	BMD NSW 1869/420
lii	State Records Insolvency Records 2/9123 6774
liii	State Records Insolvency Records 2/9430 10655