



Alexander Anderson (Snr), by Tom Roberts. Anderson was proprietor of Brocklesby station at Corowa, New South Wales. He and Tom Roberts met when they sailed from England to Australia aboard the Lusitania in 1885. Sketch portrait, 1889.
CASTLEMAINE ART GALLERY AND HISTORICAL MUSEUM

OLD AGE AND DEATH

AGEING IS A NATURAL, universal fact of biology, a physical reality as old as life itself. The skin sags, loosens, becomes increasingly lined. The nose widens, ears grow slightly larger but hear less. Hair grows less profusely on the scalp, but in ears and nostrils more profusely. Vision begins to deteriorate and eyes become increasingly sensitive to glare. The body degenerates. Weight tends to increase even as height diminishes slightly and strength declines. Stamina, reflexes and memory all worsen as body cells break down. Uninterrupted by accident or disease this natural, inevitable process ends in death.

Everyone ages, everyone dies, but these are not just universal facts of biology. Ageing and dying are also among the most basic of social facts. Each makes demands on families and communities for, like growing up, growing old involves continuing social adjustments to changing physical capacities and needs and death confronts all societies with an unceasing cycle of loss and transition.

The number of elderly Australians was higher in 1888 than ever before, and they formed a greater proportion than ever before of the total population. In Victoria the number of people aged 50 years and over had increased from just 5 per cent of the total population only 30 years previously to more than 13 per cent in 1888. In Tasmania the increase over thirty years had been much smaller—from 11.7 to 12.5 per cent—but the trend had been strongest in the 1880s. In South Australia the number of people aged 50 and over had jumped by 35 per cent in the 1880s alone and in that single decade their numbers had risen from 9.4 to over 11 per cent of the total population. In New South Wales the ratio had remained more or less constant in the 1880s but there had been a great increase in the actual number of elderly people, from fewer than 72 000 in 1881 to more than 101 000 in 1888.

What such census figures traced was the maturing of Australian colonial society. During the first 70 years of colonisation the proportion of elderly Australians had never reached more than one-third of the British ratio of aged persons to total population. But by 1888 the colonies differed little from the mother country.

Census by census, the young adults and children who had been overrepresented in the immigrant populations of pioneering days had swelled the ranks of successively older age groups. This had been most obvious in Victoria, where in 1888 the gold-rush generation of the 1850s was entering old age. Beginning in 1851, immigration into Victoria had trebled the population of the colony in only three years and the census of 1861 revealed that almost one male in three in Victoria was aged from 25 to 34 years. In contrast, ten years later, as the gold-rush bulge in the colonial population began entering early middle age, only one male in six was in this young adult age bracket. By 1888 a man who had entered the colony as a young immigrant in the early 1850s was in his late fifties or early sixties and in the first eight years of the 1880s the number of males aged between 55 and 64 years rose spectacularly. There had been about 28 000 men in this range in 1881. Seven years later there were almost 40 000. The discovery of gold a generation earlier was casting a long demographic shadow.

Australia had a majority of males among the elderly in 1888, for most of the gold-rush migrants had been men. In South Australia, 52 of every 100 people aged 50 or over were men. In Tasmania the figure was 56, in Victoria and New South Wales it was 59, and in Western Australian there were 74 men for every 26 women in this age group. In contrast, only 45 of every 100 British residents aged 50 and over were men. Thus while the overall proportion of aged Australians had increased by 1888 almost to match that of the British society, male-female ratios in the ageing population and therefore to an extent the social problems of old age, remained distinctively colonial.

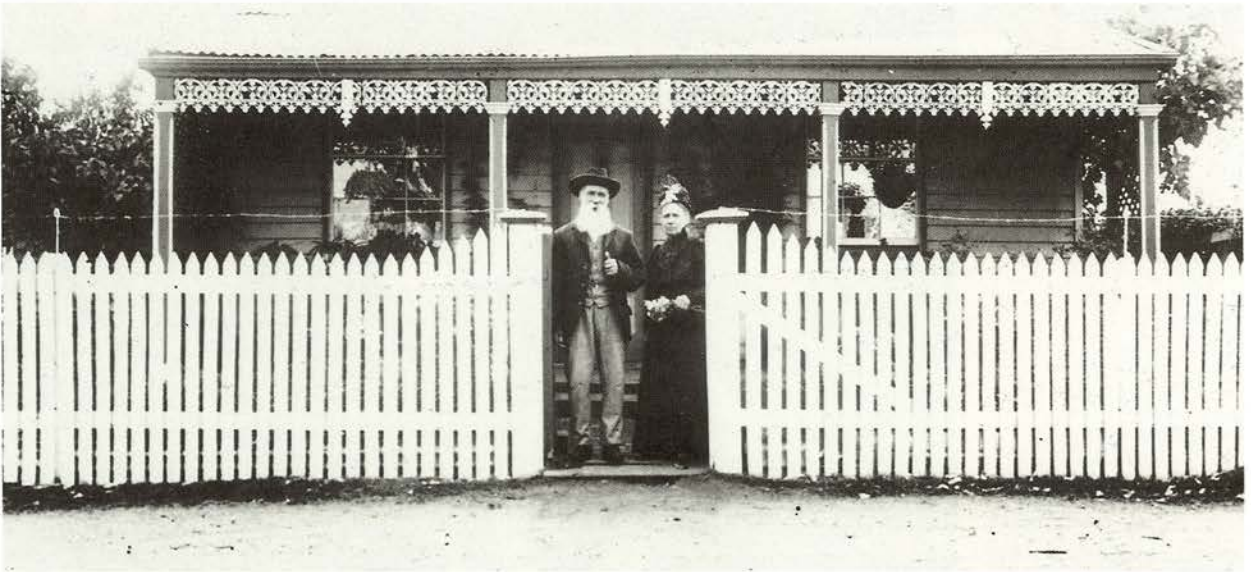
AGEING AND THE FAMILY

How such people coped with ageing varied from class to class and area to area, but the most critical factor was certainly the presence or absence of family support. Growing old makes it harder for people to remain independent and it obliges them gradually to disengage from many activities and commitments of maturity and middle age. It may simply be that they cannot work as hard or as long as before. They may relinquish responsibilities in business or family life. They may involve themselves less in community affairs and eventually withdraw entirely. In extreme old age, they may experience the isolation and dependency of permanent invalids. But whatever form it took in 1888, by far the most gentle and effective answer to the problems of ageing was to be found in the care of relatives.

Life on the small mixed farm at Lardner in west Gippsland, where John and Ann Currie and their five children lived and worked in 1888, provided just such support for 'Grandad' Currie. The elder Currie lived at Lardner only some of the time in 1888, and even during his extended visit he featured only occasionally in Ann's diary. He was only slightly involved in the day-to-day running of the farm, although he often lent a hand in the lighter tasks associated with clearing and burning and harvesting. In January 1888 he moved a clothesline for Ann and some time later he assisted in carting wool from the farm. Ann and the younger children did most of the work of housekeeping, cooking, milking, churning and gardening, and John Currie and the older children did the field work without having to depend on Grandad. 'Grandad and Katie and Bert went fishing after they finished the hay yesterday', Ann wrote on 11 January. 'They did not have much luck. Caught only 2', she added. She might have felt that the day had been demanding for her father-in-law, for while the rest of the family 'put the hay up' the next day, and 'started to reap the grass', she took him with her to Lardner to collect some things from the church hall.



One option for old men without family support was to take to the road in search of a living. A. Garran (ed), Picturesque atlas of Australasia, Sydney 1886-88.



The old man, while making himself useful where possible, had virtually retired. He was becoming increasingly dependent on the voluntary, affectionate support system of the family. The younger Curries gave him much discreet protection. Ann made a reluctant trip to the post office because if she had avoided the chore Grandad might have undertaken it. On another occasion when she and her son Bert visited neighbours with Grandad and returned after dark, her diary recorded that Grandad had been 'very frightened when we got in the forest'. And when he was away the family was concerned for him. The very last entry for 1888 records Ann's worry when her father-in-law left the farm about 2 pm to walk to meet a 5 pm train. He was off to visit friends. But at about 4 pm it started to rain. 'It did come down', she wrote, 'he must have got wet'. Then, in rather wistful afterthought, she added: 'it is hard to say where he is now'. Grandad Currie was fortunate. Few ageing Australians could expect to disengage with such dignity from the responsibilities of active adult life.

The central importance of family ties in determining the quality of life in old age added to the pain of being widowed. While men outnumbered women in every age group, the problems of coping with the death of a spouse were most often female. Widows outnumbered widowers by about three to two in New South Wales in 1888. In some other colonies the margin was greater, and the gap everywhere widened with age. Of Tasmanians between 65 and 70, one woman in every two had already been widowed, while not one man in five had experienced the death of his wife. For those aged 80 to 85 the figures showed that 80 per cent of women had been widowed, compared with only 40 per cent of men.

Widowhood was also a more traumatic experience for women. The vast majority of ageing men remained breadwinners and retained at least a measure of property, economic power and social independence. But ageing women, generally stronger biologically than their male counterparts, were as a group much weaker in the legal, social and even family rights that lent dignity to age. Their position as widows depended almost totally on the provisions of their husbands' wills.

Old men were at an advantage in the struggle to maintain economic and social independence. Not only were they more likely than elderly women to hold property, but they could cope more easily with destitution. Begging was an option for old men in a society with a large mobile male workforce. Being 'down on his

On average women lived longer than men, and many were widowed as a result of accidents. Men were four times more likely than women to be killed accidentally. This couple were among those who survived together into old age.

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Mrs Emma Rogers of Victoria, surrounded by her family. The widowed matriarch was well loved and cared for by her adult children. Family support was important for the old and in families less wealthy than the Rogers it was vital for financial reasons.

MRS E. SALKIN

luck' was an exclusively male condition, and bore little shame. Destitution left ageing women with especially desperate problems, and prompted certain distinctively female solutions. Surrogate families of old women were a common type of rent-paying unit in the tenement districts of inner Sydney in 1888, and the pattern presumably was repeated elsewhere. Beside sharing costs, such arrangements offered lonely elderly women companionship and some independence and pathetically reaffirmed the family ideal as the best model for minimising the misery of growing old in colonial society.

The amount of wealth and property that individuals or couples could carry with them into old age was of great significance. Wills probated in Castlemaine, Victoria, indicate that most husbands had been careful to ensure that their wives survived them with as much economic security as possible. Fewer than half actually left their entire estate unconditionally to their widows, but of those who did not the great majority either provided generously for whatever period the widow remained unmarried or, in leaving the estate to children, made legal provision to ensure that the widow would be supported adequately.

Class, wealth, occupation and family circumstances thus combined with such personal qualities as physical health and emotional well-being to shape the way people lived through old age. But the primary social consideration was the presence or absence of effective family support. With it, even serious problems of poverty and illness could be endured with dignity. Without it, Australia in 1888 was often a lonely and forbidding place for the old and vulnerable. Few households contained members of three generations, and most ageing Australians were forced to cope in other ways with the problems of growing old.

PIONEERS AND EXPATRIATES

One measure, popular among wealthier migrants, was to retire to the old country. The colonies were for the young, the adventurous, the energetic—places to serve the British Empire or make a fortune. But England—‘home’—appeared the most civilised, comfortable place to grow old. Among the clergy—by far the best-documented of the professions in the late nineteenth century—going ‘home’ for life’s closing years was common. Even so, there seems to have been some embarrassment about abandoning the colonies, and the return was often justified in terms of family duty or medical necessity. The return to England of prominent and successful citizens could offend colonial loyalties. Thomas Holt, who died at Bexley, Kent, in September 1888, had had a long business and political career in New South Wales before leaving his Australian interests to his son and returning to England in 1881. The *Bulletin* saw him as an example of a regrettable pattern, and accused him of using money made in Australia to earn a knighthood through philanthropy in England.

The *Bulletin* accorded honour to the old ‘pioneer’ colonists. It was not necessary to die to win recognition—and presumably support—in a local community. Nor was it necessary to be successful. Being a ‘real old stager’ was ground enough for pride and self-respect. Thus the hero of Edward Dyson’s poem, ‘Jonah’s Luck’, faced poverty in old age without any trace of shame, for he had lived through the ‘good old days’ on the diggings. He could muse with pride on

Good old days, they like to call them—they were tough old days to many.
I was through them, and they left me still the choice to graft or beg—
Left me grey, and worn, and wrinkled, aged and stumped—without a penny—
With a chronic rheumatism and this darned old twisted leg.

Dyson’s ‘Jonah’ was almost a caricature of the ageing colonial without family and property to fall back on and his story showed that Australians were already familiar with the idea of nobility in failure. It had a place in their attitudes to ageing. In ‘Jonah’s’ words,

P’r’aps you know jes how I’d feel then—cleaned
out, lame, completely gravelled—
All the friends I’d know were scattered widely north,
and east, and west—

His fate seemed grim: ‘some asylum was the prospect I’d in store’, he admitted. What made him noble and deserving was his courageous resignation in trying to meet it: ‘like a man in digger fashion’. So the story had a happy ending. The ageing pioneer found comfort and security in the form of ‘a bouncing nugget/scaling close on ninety ounces, and just frosted round with stone’.

A pioneer legend invited some distant historical reference to provide colour and legitimacy. It is likely, for example, that ‘old Tompkins’, of Hobart, who was reported to be almost ninety years of age in 1888, was in fact an ‘ex-navy man’; but the tale of his presence with Nelson at Trafalgar is harder to believe, for he would have been only seven years old in 1805! But Tompkins was a genuine pioneer, well known as a newspaper seller around Hobart for many years, and when the *Hobart Mercury* noted in August that he was ‘now in want of assistance because of imbecility’, it could also report that Dr Barnard was ‘giving every attention’.

By 1888 Waterloo was a better historical reference than Trafalgar, and many communities could boast one of the Duke of Wellington’s veterans among its most



'The stockman's last bed.'
Australasian Sketcher,
5 May 1886.

venerable citizens. Tom 'one-leg', whose name, duly corrupted, stuck to Tom Ugly's Point in the Georges River south of Sydney, had, according to legend, lost a leg at Waterloo. Such stories located pioneers in the great traditions of historical memory, but local traditions were also strong. Thus 'Jimmy the Tinker', an 'old identity' with a regrettable taste for alcohol, was remembered with affection in northern Tasmania when he died in January 1888, as an excellent mechanic who had once released the manager of the Bank of Australia from his strongroom 'when all else failed'. Perhaps because their problems were likely to have been better known than those of other elderly people in similar circumstances, such local identities might have received an unusual measure of community care once they ceased to be independent. Perhaps their prominence merely drew attention to otherwise unnoticed patterns of informal community support.

The absence of family assistance for many of those growing old increased the importance of formal and informal community welfare. Any tightly-knit community such as a religious sect might establish informal systems of social security for its weaker members. The editor of the Launceston *Examiner* observed in March that the Society of Friends offered aged members a system of mutual support and charity that ensured they rarely faced the threat of destitution. The very informality of such support meant that much of it went unrecorded, but we glimpse it in seeing how the neighbours of Mr and Mrs Child, who lived at Old Beach near Hobart, marked the occasion of the Childs' golden wedding in January. A packet of gold sovereigns, collected to show the 'respect and esteem' of the community, was presented to the old couple in the local church.

THE ECONOMICS OF AGEING

Many Australians were taking special measures to prepare for the economic problems of ageing. In Victoria funds invested in the sickness and funeral accounts of friendly societies increased by 8 per cent in 1888, continuing a trend which had been unbroken for over a decade. Growth in membership of the societies was equally rapid and by the end of 1888 the number of contributors equalled 46 per cent of the colony's married men (the base for friendly society membership). Another measure of the improved economic circumstances of the aged was the value of deceased estates. In 1868-72 the average amount left at death in New South Wales had been £94, and by 1883-87 that had risen to £322. In Victoria during the same period, the average had risen from £97 to £319.

Such figures help explain why colonial governments were becoming interested in official schemes for retirement, superannuation and pensions, and why they had begun to tax the dead. To the growing public concern with the problems of old age was added the prospect of raising significant revenue. Humane motives were secondary. Pressures to introduce retirement schemes came mainly from younger people. Recognition that 'aged servants must not be allowed to starve' and that some sort of 'sustentation fund' would have to accompany retirement provisions were tacked on almost as afterthoughts. Changes from existing voluntary charitable institutions to effective state welfare programs would depend on social and political ideas still new, but the idea of state probate duties was no longer novel: Victoria, South Australia and Queensland had already followed the Tasmanian Probate Duties Act of 1868. Governments not yet ready to *aid* their old and disadvantaged citizens were prepared to take advantage of the death of the rich. New South Wales and Western Australia continued to resist the temptation, but demographic trends were making it ever more attractive.

The great majority of old people strove to the end of their lives to avoid

becoming dependent. A gradual easing of workloads in a family environment amounted to a kind of progressive retirement for those fortunate enough to live in a two- or three-generation family. But even for such people the idea of being gainfully employed seems to have been highly valued. The Victorian census showed that 93 per cent of males aged sixty-five and over still considered themselves to be breadwinners. Fewer than 7 per cent were classified dependent. In New South Wales, of 16 811 men aged 65 and over, only 569 (3.4 per cent) admitted to being dependent on their children. Although another 10 per cent were recorded as being dependent on the state or on public or private institutional support, the figures indicate a strong reluctance to admit loss of independence. The very idea of retirement met strong resistance. 'A great deal of nonsense has been said or written about "the dead line of fifty"', a Methodist minister observed in July. 'Instead of retiring to the infirmary', he advised, '*keep living to the last. Do not idle away even the Saturday afternoon of life*'.

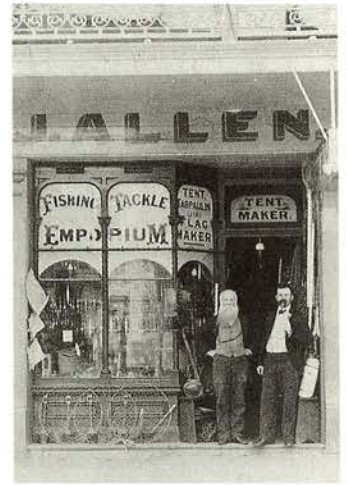
Such advice, however well-intentioned, was often impractical. Unemployment was a particular problem for older people in a society where work so often involved demanding physical labour. The ageing workman might find it increasingly difficult to cope with the basic physical demands of his job; an employer might prefer employees to be nearer the prime of life. Whatever the reasons, the records show that while men aged 45 years and over made up only 15 per cent of the total male population in New South Wales, they accounted for 30 per cent of male unemployment. And while men aged 65 years and over formed less than 3 per cent of the male population, they accounted for almost nine per cent of male unemployment.

Without family or substantial savings to fall back on, such people, when unemployed, faced a desperation for which the census had no category. They were not dependants, for they still depended on their own capacity to earn a living, but they were not effective breadwinners either. Their numbers remained fairly low while employment was generally high. If the records are accurate only about 1300 elderly men, just 8 per cent of the population aged 65 and over, were unemployed



Shopkeepers, Adelaide.

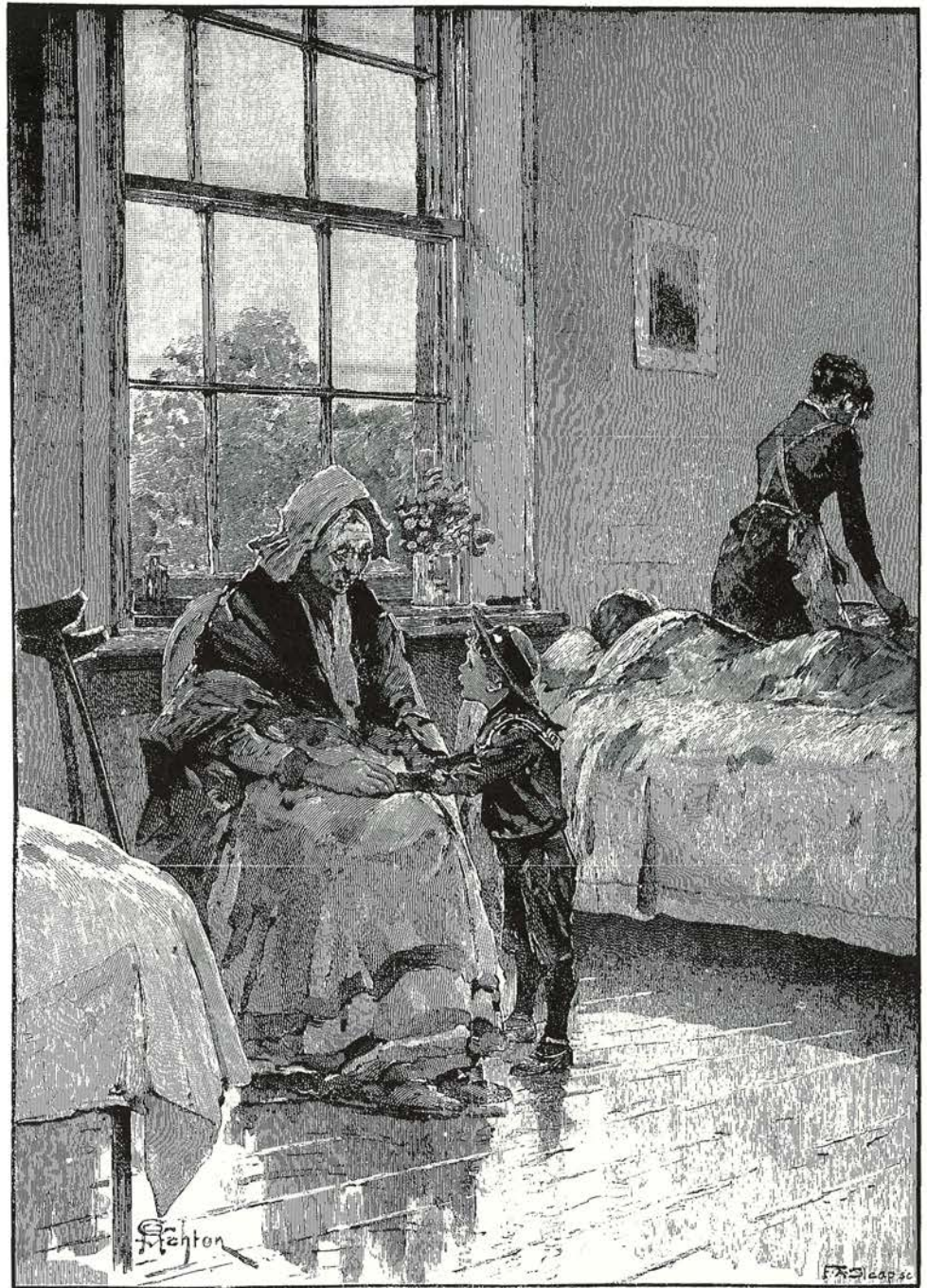
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Rabbitier.

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'The winter of life.' Needy people of all ages were housed in a building in St Kilda Road, Melbourne, which had been an immigrants' home. Inmates were expected to work if they could, and the old looked after children while mothers were washing and cleaning. Illustrated Australian News, 1 Oct 1889.



in New South Wales in 1888. Aged unemployment thus represented a significant social problem, although not a massive one. But unemployment was not the only kind of misery to accompany the quest for economic independence in old age.

An old man might be obliged to work until he dropped. William Langley was an old rabbitier on Tibora station near Mossgiel in the New South Wales southwest during the hot, dry summer of 1887–88. He was poor. His total possessions—a horse, cart, dogs, traps, cooking utensils and personal effects—would fetch only

£13 10s when sold. On 11 December 1887 he wrote a letter that he kept for the next six weeks, waiting for a chance to post it. It told a tale of tired desperation. Langley explained to an old friend that he was longing to 'come and have a month's rest' but could not afford to.

I am rabbiting and I have six dogs to feed and look after. No-one will look after my Dogs when I am away so they would starve and I should be about £15 out of pocket.

So he laboured on in the heat, working himself literally to death. 'I am in the bush', he wrote simply,

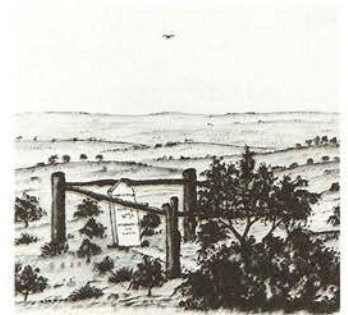
and see no-one from month to month. I am ten miles from the station. Just now it is an unthankful game rabbiting. You are never done work. There is always something to do and I have to walk from 20 to 23 and sometimes 25 miles a day beside other work at the camp. I am only making a living but cannot get out of it.

But he did get out of it. William Langley died suddenly on 29 January 1888, worn out and alone in the bush.

Yet Langley was more fortunate than some, for he remained capable of supporting himself to the end of his life. Lonely and tired, he was nevertheless independent. In a society that left care of the aged to families and charitable institutions, the greatest misery of all was reserved for those who lost their economic independence without having either spouse or adult children to fall back on. There *were* remedies for this ultimate poverty—in so-called benevolent asylums, sometimes called asylums for the infirm and destitute. But the places available in these institutions were few, the conditions were primitive, the security they provided was precarious and anybody admitted traded hunger and exposure for the horror of contagious disease. Mortality statistics for 1888 indicate that tuberculosis and pneumonia were endemic in most asylums.

A picture of the kinds of people who ended their lives in such places can be drawn by examining a single institution in detail. The Melbourne Benevolent Asylum received applications from more than four hundred and fifty destitute people during 1888. All were incapacitated in one way or another, usually by senility, rheumatism or one of the other diseases of old age, and sometimes by acute medical problems as well. Their average age was 68 years. The great majority had been in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, and compared with the general Victorian population aged 50 years and over, they were vulnerable, socially isolated people. Only one in five remained married, compared with more than three in five in the elderly population generally and they were twice as likely as other elderly people to have been widowed and almost three times as likely never to have married. In a society that by 1888 was well over half native born, an astonishing 99 per cent of those seeking asylum were ageing immigrants. Institutionalisation, in short, was a last resort for those who had nowhere else to turn.

Old people, friendless and senile, were sometimes turned away by benevolent asylums, presumably in favour of even more pitiable cases. On 9 February, Francis Harkness, a 65-year-old ex-goldminer who had migrated to Victoria from Ireland in 1853, sought help at the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum. The examining medical officer found him 'unfit' physically, but commented: 'this man is non compos mentis and should not be admitted'. Harkness was turned away. So, too, was Hannah Russell, a 78-year-old laundress, widowed and without children, who exhibited symptoms of 'old age' and 'general debility' which had advanced to the stage of senility. Confirmed cases of destitution, feebleness, rheumatism or senility



'The bushman's grave.'
STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH
AUSTRALIA

could not guarantee asylum, even, in one case, when coupled with badly ulcerated legs. For such people the future held little comfort.

Fear of refusal might have kept some people from seeking asylum, but others appear to have preferred begging to institutionalisation. Personal dignity, private fears and social prejudices might make old people prefer even death to the asylum. Police reports, coroner's inquests and anonymous obituaries, regular features of the colonial press, provide grim evidence of homelessness and destitution among the aged. Bodies were reported found in the bush, in city parks or inner-city tenements, testifying to the failure of society to provide adequately for the welfare of its most vulnerable citizens. Inquests showed that suicide by drowning, poison or gunshot wounds had seemed to some aged Australians a solution to problems too daunting to face.

Suicide was sufficiently widespread to provoke much public discussion in 1888. It was not only a problem involving old people, for ageing was merely one of many ways in which people could be forced into circumstances that became unbearable. But suicide did involve the aged and it was most prevalent in those parts of the colonies where social mobility, urbanisation or large recent migrant populations had left unusually high numbers of people without established community bonds or local family relationships to fall back on. In the fourteen years before 1888, for example, Queensland had had the highest annual suicide rate, with an average of 13.2 suicides per 100 000 of population. Victoria with 11.4 and New South Wales with 9.1 per 100 000 had followed, while Tasmania (demographically the most stable of the colonies during this period), had had a suicide rate of only 5.3 per 100 000. Commenting on these figures, the editor of the Hobart *Mercury* reflected in October that suicide seemed most common in 'the busiest places', in societies most characterised by 'excitement'. These were precisely the kinds of places where the vital, informal support systems of family and community were most precarious. They were bad places in which to be old and poor and friendless.

THE COLONIAL WAY OF DEATH

Many who died left grieving families and in 1888 the New South Wales farmer John McKinnon wrote sadly of the death of his brother Lachlan. Lachlan McKinnon had a home in Coraki, a small town on the Richmond River surrounded by rich cane farms. His wife Rhoda and their young family lived there. Lachlan chartered a cargo vessel and operated it out of the Pyrmont Docks in Sydney, mostly on the busy Newcastle and Port Kembla routes. Between trips he had lodgings in Sydney, close by the docks.

Lachlan and Rhoda saw each other only a few times a year, when he took a couple of weeks of shore leave to go home to Coraki or when Rhoda could visit him in Sydney. Yet his diary indicates that the bond between them was strong. They wrote to each other every few days and Lachlan was a great sender of telegrams. He missed his two daughters Bella and Franny, exchanged frequent letters with them and when he was home he indulged them. He had ten days in Coraki in May 1888, and the day before he had to leave he wrote: 'At home all day long. Gave the little ones the threepenny and sixpenny pieces I have been saving for them.'

Lachlan had no need to worry about the welfare of his family in his absence, for three of his brothers and two of his sisters lived on the McKinnon family farm close to Coraki. The sisters, Kate and Ann, often minded the children for Rhoda, and Lachlan's brothers John, Donald and Sandy regularly spent a couple of days at a time cutting firewood, or attending to banking and other business affairs in

Lachlan's absence. The McKinnons were well off and John McKinnon's diary showed that Lachlan and Rhoda had personal insurance as well as property. But for any individual or family unit in the McKinnon clan, the extended family itself represented the greatest security. The McKinnons supported each other in work, business and family responsibilities. They went to church together, were all active in the local Orange Lodge and the Coraki School of Arts, had family holidays together at nearby Evans Head, spent evenings together playing cribbage or dominoes. As 1888 wore on such strong family ties became critically important.

Lachlan McKinnon was dying. From the beginning of 1888 his diary was a record of extended bouts of great pain in his right shoulder, neck and side. The entries, side by side with accounts of constant work at sea and in the docks, show someone struggling to carry on a demanding way of life while fighting an illness that he did not understand.

10 January I am very bad with my right shoulder.

14 February Getting worse. Had hardly any sleep with the pain.

27 February Getting that bad pain. Afraid I'll have to give up before long.

27 March At 10pm was taken terrible bad with my side and from there to my heart. Nearly a case with me, but thank God it is over this time again.

27 May I had a very bad night altogether last night. My god have mercy on me.

Finally, Lachlan McKinnon sought medical help. On 6 September, 1888 a doctor told him that he 'would never be able to earn a living at sea again'. On medical advice he entered Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. Both he and the family at Coraki still believed that his illness was related to an accident suffered five years earlier, when he had broken three ribs bringing a ship across the Richmond River bar. John McKinnon continued to accept this diagnosis to the end, and in his diary on the last day of 1888 he attributed Lachlan's condition to the effects of one of the mishealed ribs puncturing a lung.

But Lachlan was actually dying of thoracic aneurism, a disease in which the walls of the aorta weaken and the aorta progressively balloons and finally ruptures with immediately fatal consequences. It was not a condition that could have been caused by his accident in 1883. 'I have something growing inside me', he wrote in frightened oversimplification after talking with his doctors in October. But the earlier diary record of sporadic, increasingly severe bouts of pain was an almost clinical description of the classical symptoms of the disease.

What was remarkable was the decision by Dr J.E. Maclellan to tackle thoracic aneurism by surgery, for the disease offered little hope of successful surgical treatment. Perhaps Maclellan operated on the assumption that the 'growth' was a cancer rather than an aneurism. But after a month in hospital spent believing that he was recovering slowly, Lachlan McKinnon wrote:

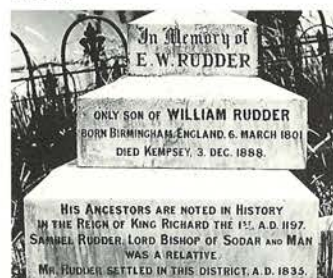
6 November I was up into the consulting rooms in the morning and afterwards Dr Maclellan came down and said . . . I shall be dead by 4 or 5 months.

Maclellan held out slight hope, however, with mention of a surgical operation involving 'terrible risk'. If successful it would give Lachlan perhaps four or five years to live, he said, failing to add that if successful it would also be virtually a medical miracle. The patient made his decision quickly:

I think its better for me to trust in God and try the operation and if it fails it fails.

Lachlan at once telegraphed the family in Coraki and his brother Donald left with Rhoda on the first steamer for Sydney. Sister Ann went to stay with the

Gravestone of E.W. Rudder, Kempsey, New South Wales. Born in England in the first year of the century, he lived into the centennial year. The inscription recalls his English ancestry and celebrates a life of more than fifty years in the district.



The gravestone of his wife notes that two of their children have already died.

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children. In Sydney, Lachlan was being visited daily by several welcome friends, and for the last few days before undergoing surgery on 19 November Rhoda and Donald were with him. The last entry in his diary was written on 18 November. The writing is scarcely legible, but the scene described is clear enough:

18 November Rhoda and Donald came ... today. Rhoda got sick here, had to go ... Last letters to Ann to Bella to Fanny.

Back in Coraki, John McKinnon's diary takes up the story, telling of a week of waiting. A telegram from Donald immediately after the operation reported Lachlan's condition as critical. A second telegram offered some hope, and a letter Kate received from him on 26 November was hopeful that Lachlan was recovering. But the next day John recorded:

Bad news today. Bro. Lachlan died at 2.30 pm. Telegram came at 12 noon stating that Bro. Lachlan was dying. No hope. Another at 4 pm stating that he was dead. Our eldest brother.

Rhoda and Donald, helped by Lachlan's friends in Sydney, made funeral arrangements and dealt with the matter of Lachlan's will and insurance policy. Lachlan McKinnon was buried in Sydney's Waverley Cemetery. By 13 December Rhoda was back in Coraki, 'a widow now', and the family was busy making sure that she was alone as little as possible. The old supportive routines were resumed; life went on. On 19 December John noted in his diary that Sandy was 'down at Lachlan's cutting firewood', and added, 'Kate down in the evening to see Rhoda ...'

The importance of home and family in Australian life in 1888 was reflected in the fact that death—like birth—usually occurred at home. Lachlan McKinnon was one of the minority who died in hospital; of the 42 692 people who died in the centennial year, about nine in every ten died at home. The death rate of 15.3 per 1000 persons throughout the colonies compared favourably with death rates in England and Wales (20.7), France (22.5) and Germany (26.3). Yet urban death rates were as high in Australia as in Europe. Hobart had a death rate of 24.1 in 1888 and rates in the other capitals were: Melbourne and Perth 20.1, Sydney 19.7, Brisbane

A hearse with horses and driver dressed and ready, Brisbane.

OXLEY LIBRARY



and Adelaide 19.5. It is significant that in the 1880s death rates were falling in both urban and rural Australia, despite a general ageing of the colonial population. In the period 1876–88, the death rate had fallen significantly in every colony except Western Australia, and there the rate in 1876 had been unusually low.

More Australians were living longer, but exactly what Australians were dying of is less clear. Various speakers told the Legislative Council of New South Wales in 1888 that statistical information on causes of death in the colony should be regarded with scepticism, because of medical ignorance and statistical incompetence. The criticism might have been valid; it was difficult to make accurate judgments about the cause of death when most people died at home. Yet certain aspects of the causes of death stand out despite the frailty of the evidence. There were at least 30 murders and 132 suicides in New South Wales in 1888, for the figures were established by coroners' inquiries. There is no doubt that tuberculosis was a major killer, although the more general term 'phthisis' was used to include various diseases with similar symptoms. Death in infancy was almost as common, as was a general cause of death described simply as 'old age'. And among the causes listed by the registrar-general in New South Wales there followed pneumonia, diarrhoea, convulsions, bronchitis, various forms of heart disease, enteritis, typhoid and cancer. Phthisis was blamed for 1045 deaths in 1888, cancer for 404.

One important cause of death has been omitted from this list. Fatal accidents were so common that they surpassed all but phthisis as a cause of death. Of every 1000 deaths in New South Wales in 1888, 92 resulted from accidents. The rate was lower in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, where accidents accounted for 64, 68 and 80 deaths per 1000 respectively, but higher in Queensland, where the rate of accidental death was 137 per 1000. In the United States only 62 deaths per 1000 resulted from accidents, a rate identical to that in England and Wales. The Australian figures reveal the dangerous nature of male work and recreation, for men were almost four times as likely as women to be killed accidentally.

The most common fatal accidents involved fractures and contusions (almost 45 per cent of all accidental deaths), drowning (20 per cent) and burns (15 per cent). The first usually resulted from workplace accidents or falls from trains, buggies and horses, and they reflected badly on safety standards in factories, mines and transport systems. Drowning was commonly a recreational accident. The most notable drowning tragedy in 1888 took the life of Robert Seddon, captain of a touring English football team. He died while swimming with friends in a creek near Maitland, and was one of 176 people to drown in New South Wales during the year. Less often, drowning resulted from boating accidents or from attempts to cross swollen streams. In 52 cases of people drowned in New South Wales—that is where bodies were found floating in the sea, in rivers, creeks or dams—coroners unable to distinguish accident from suicide returned open verdicts. Burns were the most common cause of accidental deaths in the home. Fire was still the major source of energy for heating, cooking and domestic lighting, so deaths involving fires or smoke inhalation took many forms. Of all the major types of accidents, fire alone threatened women and children as much as it did men.

Accidental death was newsworthy. Newspapers gave their readers a constant flow of sudden tragedies. On 6 July the Adelaide *Advertiser* carried nine items of news from its Victorian correspondent. One reported a murder, another a mining accident involving a lucky escape by a miner injured in an earth fall, a third told of a Melbourne youth who died, 'fearfully mutilated', after being pulled into the machinery he was operating at a Northcote brickworks, a fourth described a fatal railway accident caused by the collapse of an axle on a railway truck, and a fifth dealt with a fatal poisoning in a Melbourne restaurant. There were only four items



'A favourite football player. The late Robert L. Seddon, captain of the British football team now visiting Australia.' Seddon drowned while swimming with friends in a creek near Maitland. Town and Country Journal, 25 Aug 1888.

of other news, and the five reports of accidents were in addition to accounts of local South Australian tragedies and descriptions of fatal accidents in colonies other than Victoria.

The *Advertiser* was no different from any other colonial newspaper in its coverage of such news. Australians in 1888 knew that the danger of serious accident was a major threat to them and their families, and the barrage of tragic news might have served as a reminder to be cautious. But whatever the reason, violent death held a strong fascination. What stands out in the reports of accidental death, suicide or murder is the degree of *detail* that they made public. The facts were not sensationalised, they were explicit in an almost clinical sense. People unknown in life became well known in death, for the process of death itself evidently was regarded as interesting and familiar as well as horrifying. When a young telegraph operator named Peter Gleeson fell from the platform of Armidale railway station under a moving train on Saturday 30 June, the following facts became news throughout New South Wales, and shorter reports were published in other colonies. A local doctor,

after making a minute examination, found that the injuries sustained by the young man were of a fatal nature, as the right shoulder was completely crushed; there was a deep gash behind the ear about four inches long, just escaping the jugular vein; the right side of the head was crushed in, and the indentation was filled with ashes and dust; and there was a long, deep cut on the left side of the back, under the shoulder, and it is surmised that it penetrated to the lungs. He lost a tremendous amount of blood, and it is wonderful how he escaped being instantaneously killed. The poor young fellow breathed his last on Sunday morning at about eleven a.m. . . .

The account went on to describe the bedside scene as Peter Gleeson died, and listed those present.

Australians did not shy away from the idea of death or from the details. Frank interest, not embarrassment, was normal. People whose sexual modesty would, according to a French visitor to the colonies in 1888, make them 'blush' to pronounce the words 'shirt' or 'belly' in mixed company, were evidently fascinated by details of the parts of a drowned body that had been fish-eaten, exactly which limbs or organs had been crushed in an industrial or traffic accident or how a body had burned when trapped in a burning building or under a burning log. Perhaps the fact that death still occurred in the home gave it this familiarity. Perhaps a widespread belief in life beyond the grave took some of the horror out of it. Whatever the reason, Australians in 1888 dealt with death openly and publicly.

GRIEF AND MOURNING

The act of dying could be an important social ritual; the act of mourning certainly was. There were protocols that both the dying and the grieving tried to observe, protocols that began with the onset of serious illness and ended with appropriate funeral and mourning rites. Mrs T.J. McIntosh, aged 30 years, died in the Northern Rivers district of New South Wales in the autumn of 1888. She died in pain, of an unspecified illness, after leaving her young family and moving back to her parents' home as her condition became worse. In this house on the banks of the Clarence River, amid relatives and friends, her death became a solemn, semi-public occasion:

Looking at father, mother, sisters, husband, and dear children, she could say weakly 'Thy will be done'. Sometimes the pain was agony, but in her distress she cried unto God and He relieved her. Pain was sweet with Jesus to sustain and



comfort her. Her last hour was a time of blessing to her friends as they joined her in partaking of the tokens of the Saviour's dying love. Patient resignation to God's will, and at times heavenliness of countenance and spirit, made the sick room so sacred that ministers and friends alike felt it good to be there. To sorrowing friends she would say, 'Don't cry, I am going home' . . . in answer to the question of her sister she said, 'Oh yes; all is bright'. Then she closed her eyes on friends and the Clarence River, and beheld the River of God, and saw the King in His beauty.

Religious newspapers carried many such obituaries. References to the presence of family at the deathbed, including young children, are significant, for at home, amid family, was the proper place to die. The rituals symbolised and reinforced family solidarity at times when surviving members most needed it. The presence of friends symbolised and strengthened supportive relationships between a bereaved family and its wider community. The living were familiar with death, for those words in the *Book of common prayer* remained literally true: 'In the midst of life we are in death.' So individuals, families and communities sought reassurance in well-established rituals and found consolation in beliefs that took from death some of its sting.

Religion remained central to people facing death. Mrs McIntosh evidently gained personal comfort and consolation from her conviction that to die was to live again and to behold the king in his beauty. But her confident acceptance of death and the certainty of her faith also fulfilled a protocol through which the dying reassured the living. For in an age of growing religious uncertainty, the despair associated with death sometimes eroded religious belief. The mother of another young woman who died in 1888 admitted, in a poem written four months after her daughter's death, that her faith had been threatened. 'We saw how terrible it is to die', she recalled, and the result was a disillusionment which 'Scarce deigns to hope, and hardly dares to pray'. Doubt here gave way at last to hope, but not easily. 'God of our broken hearts!' the poem continued,

Bush burial, by Frederick McCubbin, 1890. At one time McCubbin called this painting The last of the pioneers. The Age described it for readers. 'The remains of the deceased, doubtless the wife of the grey-headed old man reading the service, are already lowered into the trench recently excavated, and the group is completed by the stalwart son or son-in-law, his weeping wife and child, and a dog.' Age, 29 Mar 1890.

GEELONG ART GALLERY

... to us be given
 To view this trouble in the light of heaven.
 God of the living! Thou art still her life
 Beyond the stars as in this mortal strife.
 For but a few more years of earthly pain
 And we shall meet our darling child again,
 Catch the full tide of happiness and joy
 Which never ceases and can never cloy.

Often there was no doubt. Christian belief was strong and there was a convincing matter-of-factness in the sort of comments, common in obituaries, that referred to a deceased friend as 'one of those whom I look forward to meeting in heaven'. But in other cases doubt already had given way to unbelief. There were important elements in Australian culture that left no room at all for traditional Christian beliefs. Henry Lawson caught some of them in 'Poets of the Tomb', which ended with a rejection of beliefs and values built on assumptions of immortality:

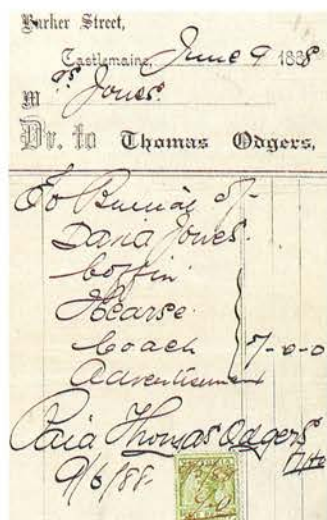
Such wormy songs of mouldy joys can give me no delight;
 I'll take my chances with the world—I'd rather live and fight.
 Fortune may laugh along my track, or wear her blackest frown—
 I'll try to do the world some good before I tumble down.
 Let's fight for things that ought to be, and try to make em boom;
 Mankind gets small assistance from our ashes in the tomb.

The great majority of Lawson's countrymen, however, when confronted by death found consolation in the Christian rituals and beliefs that recurrently brought the living together with the dying around a deathbed.

FUNERALS

After the rituals of the deathbed came the rituals of the graveside. The protocols might have differed greatly from class to class but the imperative to do the right thing by the dead was universal. And it was expensive. In New South Wales the basic funeral paid for out of the deceased estate of those who died without a will cost at least £5. In one case, where a body had to be taken 34 kilometres into Orange for burial, the basic cost was as high as £16. But the undertaker at least felt uneasy enough to submit an affidavit stating that the fee was reasonable. A simple, decent burial in Victoria required £2 for a grave in the cemetery, £5 for the hire of a carriage or hearse and £7 to pay an undertaker. When a working man might earn less than £100 per annum, these were large sums. But the funeral of a loved one was no occasion for meanness. The costs differed, but every family dipped into its pockets to pay its last respects, for perhaps the greatest slur of all was lack of respect for the dead.

For the very rich and for state funerals, respect for the dead required ostentation. The funeral of Sir Anthony Musgrave, who had died on 9 October while governor of Queensland, was held in melancholy pageantry two days later. Brisbane virtually closed down for the day. From early in the morning thousands of people took up positions along the funeral route. The coffin, flower-bedecked and mounted on a gun carriage, was preceded by a thousand officers and men of the colonial defence force and accompanied by a procession that included 85 carriages and 230 members of an official party on foot. This mourning train stretched for almost three kilometres as it wound its way from St John's Cathedral to the Toowong cemetery.



G. DAVISON

But not only people at the summit of society were buried with pomp and ceremony. The funeral of a Sydney fireman, Richard Dalton, who had fallen to his death while fighting a fire in the city on 22 February, showed that an association of working men (in this case the Metropolitan Fire Brigade), would go to great expense and trouble to pay final respects to a workmate whose death had captured their imagination and sympathy. Four black horses arrayed in jet-black plumes led Dalton's cortege, drawing a manual fire engine on which, draped with a Union Jack, rested a polished cedar casket. Then came three hundred firemen, marching in file four deep, two mourning coaches, and a couple of steam engines. 'This procession', the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported,

headed by an amalgamated band playing the 'Dead march', proceeded along Castlereagh-street to Bathurst-street, whence it turned west into George-street, and thence to the mortuary station in Regent-street. The footpaths in George-street were crowded with spectators, and the balconies and windows of the buildings along the line of the route were availed of as points of vantage from which to view the mournful company.

These cases were not typical of normal funeral ceremonies, but they expressed a general social appreciation of the importance of the most solemn rite of passage. The full significance of the contemporary McCubbin painting by Frederick McCubbin, *Bush burial*, can be appreciated only against the background of a society alert to the pathos of so rudimentary a ritual. In the bush, a funeral brought a community together as no other social occasion could. The bereaved would spare no effort to arrange a ceremony solemn and memorable; their neighbours, however distant, would spare no effort to come. Thus in Lawson's poem Talbragar,

Funeral procession of Francis Ormond, grazier and philanthropist, Melbourne. He died in France on 5 May 1889. His body was on its way along Collins Street to Spencer Street station, after a service at the Scots church. It was carried by train for burial at Geelong.

LA TROBE LIBRARY



Ben Duggan rode recklessly to his death while trying to gather mourners to the funeral of his deceased mate, Jack Denver. And, in his absence,

For thirty miles round Talbragar the boys rolled up in strength,
And Denver had a funeral a good long mile in length.

Once Duggan's body was found the process was repeated. People gathered from far and wide once more, this time to honour Duggan, for 'The Western bushmen knew the way to bury dead like him'.

They might not have had to travel far to bury their dead, but the poorer classes in the cities often had to make great sacrifices to ensure that the duties of mourning were properly met. The urban equivalent of the pathos of the *Bush burial* was the public grave, identifiable only by a number on an iron tablet and shared with other anonymous corpses. Such indignities were all too common. Some people were simply too poor to pay for funerals of any kind. In Melbourne's general cemetery at Carlton, an unattractive area called the Potter's Field was set aside for public graves and pauper burials. But poor Australians seem to have been much like their counterparts in England, who might spend fully one-third of a small legacy left by a late husband to buy expensive mourning clothes for his funeral. Some might even deny medicine to a sick child in order to save money for mutes and plumes for the possible funeral. Often they scratched together money that they could ill afford to spend, and the living made sacrifices to maintain social appearances on behalf of the dead.

The problem was serious enough to get considerable public attention in 1888. In October, perhaps prompted by the extravagance of Musgrave's funeral in Brisbane, calls appeared in the correspondence columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the setting up of a Burial, Funeral and Mourning Reform Association. It was argued that 'economy to the living is no dishonour to the dead', and the rich were called to lead the way towards less ostentatious rituals of mourning. Interest in the subject continued for several weeks, and among the most telling contributions was the blunt assertion that Australian working men were under pressure to choose funeral arrangements that could 'devour' their life savings. The solution, advanced with forlorn hope, was the *general* adoption of a simple badge of mourning, simple funerals, and an end to the practice of seeking 'expensive, hideous, heathen-looking headstones'.

Mourning did not end with a funeral, nor did the expense of honouring the dead cease there. A handbook, *Australian etiquette*, explained that Australians had 'no prescribed period of mourning', but recommended that women should wear the black, crepe-covered dress, black bonnet and black accessories of widowhood for at least twelve months and less conspicuous symbols during the second year of mourning, when the widow might re-enter 'society'. For a deceased nephew, niece, uncle or aunt, mourning might end at three months. The paraphernalia of mourning, especially for women, could be expensive as well as depressing. Everything from decorous stationery to jet jewellery and black silk evening dresses could be supplied. Ordinary folk might dispense with many of the rituals and symbols that only the wealthy could afford, and their costs might not go much beyond a decent black suit or dress for the funeral and a black hatband thereafter.

The conventions were powerful. The rituals of death, grief and mourning had deep religious and social roots. Christian faith anticipated the resurrection of the body. At the second coming those 'dead in Christ' would rise with the living to meet Him in the air, so it seemed appropriate to bury the dead with religious solemnity, in hallowed, pleasant surroundings. If life had been hard and impoverished, that seemed all the more reason to affirm dignity, at least in death.



Fireman's funeral, George Street Sydney, by Arthur Streeton. Oil, 1894.

ART GALLERY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

Where it had been successful, the act of paying fulsome respects to the dead was a decorous affirmation of social status.

Australians in 1888 buried and mourned their dead in ways that befitted the varied ways of life, social classes and community types of the six colonies. The funeral ritual was an affirmation of basic social and family realities. Respect for the dead embraced the notion that the making of Australian society would be the cumulative work of many generations. It was for the living to acknowledge their debts. Grand funerals also symbolised the extent to which goals had already been reached, fortunes made or comfortable circumstances established in the colonies. The Australian way of death thus mirrored the Australian way of life.



Illuminated address to the mayor of Sandhurst. Members of parliament, trade union leaders, public-spirited businessmen and governors could also have expected such an honour.

ROYAL VICTORIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BENDIGO

IV

THE PUBLIC
DOMAIN