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A TWIN BIRTH IN SYDNEY  
IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES

WITH A SLIGHT SKETCH OF THE SUBSEQUENT  
CAREER OF ONE OF THE CHILDREN

By R. SCOT SKIRVING

ON THE OCCASION OF A RECEPTION  
GIVEN TO HIM BY THE  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
ROYAL PRINCE ALFRED HOSPITAL

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*This is a family gathering of the staff — professional and lay, and helpers and well-wishers of the R.P.A.H. — and, as such, I now address you:*

I have often thought, and sometimes said, that really old people should be seldom seen and never heard. At best, they may be looked upon with kindly eyes as museum pieces, but their words are, too often, not wise, even although they may possess that grey hair which is frequently, and wrongly, said to impart wisdom and good counsel.

But I am speaking today because I have accepted, with some trepidation, the kindly invitation to be present here — a pleasant gesture from the Chairman and Directorate of this, our much loved Hospital — for which I am, naturally, gratified.

I think it must be true that I am the oldest living member of the Medical Staff of this Hospital, for I became one of it in 1884 or 1883 as its second Medical Superintendent.

This now famous home for "the Sick and Hurt" had just barely got into working order, but it was steadily ingravescent, even from its cradle stage — and still is — as it acts up to the motto of another widely known enterprise, for "while it lives it grows."

It has indeed done so — let me tell you — in 1883 it contained less than 150 beds in being — with two Resident Medical Officers, a matron, 11 sisters, 14 day nurses, 11 night nurses, 10 nurse probationers and 11 ward workers. There were 2 honorary physicians, 2 honorary surgeons, with 4 corresponding assistant physicians and surgeons. No specialist medical officers had been appointed. Now in 1955 the record is as follows: Honorary staff, 225; resident staff 85; nursing staff 1,000; lay staff 1,125. There is a daily average of occupied beds of over 1,220 and approximately 2,000 visitors attend the Hospital daily.

Today, in 1955 — more than 70 years later the growth in buildings, equipment and staff, has been enormous for it includes, standing four square:—

1. The original R.P.A.H. with additions

2. King George V Hospital
3. Gloucester House
4. Several other ancillary buildings or departments which accommodate those who labour in them, not only as Hospitals pure and simple, but as Medical Centres for teaching and research.

Great and admirable indeed has been its growth in things materiel — in bricks and stone — the visible tenement — and a fit covering to the work done within these walls.

But, what of the Spirit within? The development of what well may be called the "Soul" of this great Temple of Healing. That, too, I truly think has been added to it.

It makes me proud and comforted to believe that all such great buildings do develop a kind of corporate Spirit, call it a Soul if you like — well suited to animate a place, the object of which is to relieve human suffering, and thus to mitigate the "Martyrdom of Man".

Surely it is an honour and a privilege for us all — Lay or Professional, to build or work therein — even as, centuries ago those who built cathedrals were fired by the wish to impart to those vast silent buildings, a Soul — the Voiceless expression of devotion to usefulness and an altruistic life. To us who live in bustling, changeful times, great enterprises and buildings such as this in which we stand today, may well be the modern expression of what those devout builders of cathedrals — those houses of prayer — felt, and did, when the world was less sophisticated than it is today.

I spoke just now of the similarity of purpose and altruistic urge which made men in modern times, build Hospitals, just as in the ages of faith, their forebears raised the spires of stately cathedrals — visible reminders of things not of this world. Even in these great churches there was almost always some inner shrine of special holiness, to commemorate the lives of saints, or others truly good and great. You may remember such places in "The Great

Abbey", at Canterbury too, perhaps in the crypt of Saint Pauls or in the Chapels of some of the great Public Schools. So I think, to anyone with a sentient inner life, such places of retreat from the insistent pressing world without, do truly become a refuge and a solace to broken people who need mending.

So, especially in an Hospital like this with a large population of men and women, many of them sorely tried in mind, body or estate, and faced with the very present problems of life—bereavement, immedicable ills — immediate operation — and all "the regrets and might have beens" of this difficult world. As F. W. Myers wrote, of "people tossed in the stress of the soul's worst weather and struggling to cope with some 'Trafalgar' of inner fears and unspoken and unspeakable emotions."

All such folk may well find a haven of rest in the quiet air and silence of an Hospital Chapel — a place indeed of silence and alone-ness, and silence and alone-ness are quite good things as long as they are not too big or too prolonged doses.

Such a restful place for Reverie, for spiritual stocktaking, and perhaps even for Prayer, gathered minds, and renewed courage will very shortly be completed, for the New Chapel is being made ready by the Board of Directors and will be a needed and goodly adjunct to the ordinary work-a-day activities of the R.P.A.H.

In these early days which I wistfully recall, I had, quite soon, the good fortune to be elected a member of the Honorary Medical Staff. There were then, in Sydney, plenty rather quaint or colourful doctors — and still more odd patients — hence there were lots of amusing or strange happenings, which I think unlikely to take place in present day Hospital experience.

I cannot imagine Dr. Selle, for instance, our good competent imperturbable Superintendent, like the "Good Woman in the Bible", setting out while it was yet night and trotting across

Missenden Road from "Maud Cottage" where the two Residents then lived, to inspect the weighing and condition of the day's supply of meat—an incident of the domestic day sometimes marked by a regrettable violence of speech! I admit such incidents while Medical Superintendent. About the same time the following small tale may amuse you.

In those days the extensive Hospital grounds were not yet covered by massive buildings, but were clad in green grass and other succulent herbage with occasional trees and shrubs — there were still hares — still happy, hopping, about, and not yet harried, perhaps I might say "harrier-ed". In that unlovely region to the west of Missenden Road there then lived a prolific population, some of whom, quite sensibly, kept cows to give extraneous, undiluted nourishment to their pullulating offspring — their owners realised that across the street lay quite good grazing, without any agistment costs. I do not myself squeal about this — I would probably have done as they did.

Why even in the more precious air of Macquarie Street in those days it was a common sight to see a bevy of matronly cows spend their unthinking days in the Domain, I suppose on the same terms as their humbler sisters in the R.P.A.H. grounds, and waddle home by themselves at the proper time to the stables (the doctors then all "slew in chariots" and their horses lived in them) to be milked and "so to bed"!

There were, from the beginning, some of our nurses of true country upbringing — real dinkum bush-bred girls — I hope there are still grandchildren here of the same stock. When these girls heard that the Board objected to these foraging cows, two of them came to my office to suggest a remedy—One of them was, I think, Sister Toshack, whom I remember still with respect and liking. She, some years later, started the first good Home for Private Nurses in Sydney — a great boon to nurses, and practitioners as well.

Said she, "Let them all come. I know how to make the owner pay — and the cows as well." So she roped in two or three other girls skilled in country crafts. One of them looked such a slight, gentle-eyed damsel that I wondered if she really could do so big a milking job.

So I asked her if she was strong enough to tackle it. Although very demure and looking at me with the expression of a disillusioned spaniel, but with a quite assured manner — "What, milk a little mob like that? Why, Sir, I'm a RINGER with cows."

"Really," said I. "And what other animals have you dealt with?"

"I've milked plenty of nanny goats and ewes" (she called them 'Yowes', so I knew that she was a countryman of mine, and at once understood her obvious ability). "And," continued this elegant girl, "if ye bail up the wee beastie tight and put a wee nosebag over its crooked mouth, I'd **milk a Ferret!**"

All they said they would do — they did; the cows were bailed and milked thoroughly, and driven into Missenden Road waddling away with placid faces, full tummies, and empty udders.

In less than a week the crafty owners had tumbled to the mystery of their cows coming home with dry udders. But all was now serene at the R.P.A.H.

After all, this incident seems to me to have been just a polite feminine way of reminding the cows "to keep off the grass" — **mark you I don't say which cows!**

I think, indeed, that R.P.A.H. was always a little picturesque in its inmates and their ways, and I am glad now, over 70 years later, that I realised how good and able many of these people were — and that I was witnessing the birth and growth of a truly great Hospital, which had been conceived and germinated in the minds of perhaps half a dozen men, possessed of vision, ability and tenacity of purpose.

I readily call some of them to mind: Alfred Roberts, Lewis

Levy, Alfred Stephen, John Brown Watt, Edward Knox, James Fairfax, Philip Sydney Jones, and others whose pictures hang outside the Board Room.

One of them was a doctor — with a flair for surgery of a temperate and restrained type, and was a not-un-needed example of Victorian good manners. I need hardly tell you his name; it was ALFRED ROBERTS—and I think he had liked to be addressed as **Mr.** Roberts. (Some superior critics, indeed, used the feminine prefix common in the unwedded sense.) But let me say that we, who knew him best thought he was the most potent factor in the formation of the R.P.A.H.

Roberts was an admirable example of a man — not perhaps brilliant in intellect, or deeply learned in his profession, or really cultured in a literary sense, but with an unflagging devotion to **one definite object** — the creation of something Sydney badly needed — a thoroughly modern up-to-date Hospital in structure, equipment, method, management and capable of becoming not only a good school of nursing but an institution for the clinical instruction of students doing medicine in the young but vigorous school of the University of Sydney.

He took pains to learn how to do it. He went overseas to many places, and he consulted wise men and women, one of the latter was Florence Nightingale. To her in later years he gave me an introduction, and I like to boast that I had afternoon tea with her. She was then a still sprightly girl of about ninety, who was said to have enjoyed bad health ever since the deplorable Crimean War ended, where, at least, she had earned universal fame.

Years passed — the Hospital, the child of Sir Alfred's affection, grew in grace, size and efficiency, and he lived to see this creation, so greatly the product of his own vision, and the work of his active years, in full being.

Make no mistake — keep him in memory and gratitude — he left the world **enriched** by his life's work.

His mantle fell on capable shoulders — on those of T. P. ANDERSON STUART, who, himself was already no mean organiser of great undertakings, for his unflagging perseverance, and continual troubling of potentates and politicians, had actually made, and set working a small, but quite competent school of medicine.

But the complementary help of a good teaching hospital was really an absolute necessity, in which the students could complete their basic studies in the University, by work in the wards of a great hospital, and such a union was exactly what the R.P.A.H. and the medical school needed to make a reality of the vision which Roberts and Anderson Stuart both had, more or less, in common — a fortunate conjunction for both their institutions, and they got it.

Moreover, it is good for the staffs of all hospitals to teach — for it stimulates them to keep up to the mark, lest they be found wanting by those they have to instruct.

This close co-operation lasted, and still obtains until the growth of the School itself, and the proper falling into line of several other, now great teaching hospitals, relieved the congestion in the R.P.A.H., and a proper quota of students went to these other hospitals to learn clinical lore.

Time dealt not unkindly with these two great undertakings — sometimes with a little friction, but always with steady progress and T. P. Anderson Stuart lived to see many of his schemes reach completion, and many advances in Medical knowledge used.

I doubt if he lived long enough to witness the altered prognosis in Diabetes due to insulin — or to know what the Sulpha drugs could do in many diverse diseases, or, above all, the miracle of Penicillin and its manifold uses.

He, partially, and Roberts wholly, always remind me of Moses on Pisgah, who "visualised that promised land", which Joshua, and lots of lesser lights in our own times,



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entered upon, but T. P. A. S., like Moses, never did (as doubtless you recollect).

Stuart had some faults, and who hasn't; but his fame will last as long as his work endures — the Medical School of Sydney.

In the year 1904, a young student of medicine became a pupil in this Hospital, and his name was Herbert Schlink. As years passed he "qualified" and became a member of the Staff of the R.P.A.H. — but it was soon evident that he also found usefulness in service, apart from his special job. This later led to his election to the Board and finally, to the Chairmanship thereof.

It would make me uncomfortable, and Schlink still more so, if I enumerated all the changes, improvements, and vast building extensions which he, and his co-directors have accomplished during these later years.

You can judge for yourselves the magnitude of their work, planned and accomplished by them, not, indeed, on one side, but on both sides of the Missenden Road.

Let us then not forget that Roberts, the Founder, Anderson Stuart the indomitable merger and consolidator, with Schlink, the "Expander", are the three men who have so greatly given the R.P.A.H. the position it holds to-day. It has served this country well. It has been a great factor in the education of Doctors — in all branches of medicine, surgery and obstetrics. It has taught what good nursing means, and stimulated research, and above all, it has fulfilled its primary duty in the relief of human suffering.

I beg again to thank you, Sir, and your Colleagues on the Board for your kindly gesture in asking me to be here to-day — my only excuse for addressing you — for, as I said, I must surely be the last survivor of that little company of men and women, all of us servants of this Hospital, with whom I started my own long pilgrimage through the wilderness of this dishevelled world.





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A twin birth in Sydney in the early eighties, with a slight sketch of the subsequent career of one the children / by Robert Scot Skirving ; on the occasion of a reception given to him by the Board of Directors, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

LISE MELLOR

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