SIR GEORGE STEPHEN (1794-1879)—ABOLITIONIST

The year 2007 marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. A key force in the campaign to end slavery was a group called the Clapham Sect which included the British politician William Wilberforce and his brother-in-law, James Stephen. However, while the trading of slaves to Britain was outlawed in 1807, it took another twenty-six years before a British Act of Parliament in 1833 abolished the institution of slavery throughout Britain and its dominions. One of the leading lights in the abolition of slavery, Sir George Stephen, is buried in St Kilda Cemetery.

George Stephen was born at St Christopher, West Indies, in 1794, the son of James Stephen and his first wife Anne (Anna) née Stent. James Stephen had been instrumental in drafting the 1807 Slave Trade Abolition Act. George Stephen was originally to join the medical department of the army but, according to his obituary in The Argus, the defeat of Napoleon at Leipzig in 1813 meant that hundreds of young men on the medical staff of the army had to look for alternative employment. George was then sent by his father to Cambridge with the view to becoming a physician but, two years later, began studying law.

George Stephen married Henrietta Ravenscroft, the daughter of a clergyman, in 1821 and the couple were to have seven children. From 1823, George Stephen continued the anti-slavery crusading of his father. His role was explained in his obituary in The Argus of 21 June 1879:

“During 1823 facts were brought to light concerning slavery in Mauritius which justified [Sir Fowell] Buxton in demanding an inquiry and the House of Commons acceded to the motion. Sir George Stephen was appointed to the conduct this inquiry, and immediately entered on the work. The 56th Regiment, which was stationed in Mauritius, had returned to England, and from the evidence given by the men sufficient was elicited to satisfy the Government of the truth of the charges. Commissioners were dispatched to the Mauritius to prosecute the inquiry there, and in the meantime Sir George Stephen examined all the witnesses that could be discovered in England. The Mauritius inquiry lasted for sometime and eventually terminated in the emancipation of every slave who could establish the date of his arrival to be subsequent to the surrender of the colony...

Concerned about the slow progress of the movement for the emancipation of slaves, he wished to organise a national agitation on the subject. He prepared an anti-slavery creed,
laying down the principle that to ‘uphold slavery was a
crime before God, and that
every Christian was called
upon to aid in its suppress-
ion’. It was considered too
radical in its character to be
considered expedient in the
temper of the public, and
would tend to alienate much
of the Parliamentary support
on which they relied. He
received help, however from
an unexpected quarter. He
was invited by Mr Cropper of
Liverpool, to dine with him
and some friends, and to
give a further explanation of
the scheme. The company
comprised about 20 Quak-
ers, to whom he again ex-
plained his proposals. Mr
Cropper asked him what he
intended to do. “I shall go to
the end”, he replied, “and do
my best to carry it through if I
can raise £1,000”. “All
right”, was immediately ex-
plained by everyone around
the table, and was followed
by a subscription of £500
from Cropper, and £250
from Joseph Sturge. Such
was the commencement of
the Agency Committee, and
thus supported Sir George
Stephen was enabled to
carry out his plan, which
proved successful beyond
his hopes. Popular excite-
ment was aroused, and
when the Bill dealing with
the subject of slavery was
brought before Parliament,
an anti-slavery petition with
187,000 signatures, ob-
tained in less than 10 days
was presented. Warned by
the exhibitions of public feel-
ing, the West Indian party
changed their policy and
offered to withdraw their
opposition to the measure
on payment of £20,000,000
to the planters and their
mortgagees. The views of Sir
George Stephen as the rep-
resentative of the Agency
party, were asked, and he
was given to understand that
his answer would determine
the fate of the Bill, as except
on those terms a majority
was hopeless. He felt him-
self to be in an embarrassing
position, for, according to the
views he had circulated, the
proposal amounted to the
purchase of negro liberty,
and therefore to an absolute
abandonment of principle,
but under stress of circum-
stances he decided to accept
the compromise on condition
that the Bill should contain
an absolute prohibition of all
slavery in the British Domin-
ions for ever. This was con-
ceded, the Bill passed, and
received the Royal Assent.”

These actions ultimately led
to George Stephen’s knight-
hood in February 1838.

About 1847 he decided to
become a barrister and on 6
June 1849 was called to the
Bar at Gray’s Inn. Interest-
ingly, his eldest son, James
Wilberforce Stephen had
been called to the Bar six
months earlier. In the next
few years Sir George built up
an insolvency practice in
Liverpool and Manchester
but when this business de-
clined, he accepted a pro-
sal from his son James
Wilberforce that their fami-
lies should migrate to Victo-
ria (one son, William Raven-
scroft Stephen, had settled
and married in the colony in
1852). In 1855, Sir George
and Lady Stephen together
with James Wilberforce
Stephen and his wife Kathe-
rine Rose née Vernon arrived
in Victoria.

Shortly after their arrival, on
9 August 1855 Sir George
and his son were both admit-
ted to the Victorian Bar.
They shared legal chambers
for the rest of their profes-
sional lives. Sir George lived
at “Helenslea” on Glen Eira
Road, Caulfield. The house
still stands and forms part of
Shelford Girls’ Grammar. Sir
George gave the first parcel
of land and paid for the con-
struction of the first St
Mary’s Church in Glen Eira
Road (where he was also a
parishioner and taught Sun-
day School).

Sir George was eventually
made a Queen’s Counsel in
1871. He was also busy
outside the law and was first
president of the Melbourne
Chess Club (1866) as well as
being active in the Church of
England. He also made un-
successful attempts to enter
the Victorian Parliament.

Sir George died at Caulfield
on 20 June 1879, prede-
ceased by his wife in 1869
and survived by six of his
seven children.

Sir George’s wife, Lady Henri-
etta (Harriet) Stephen (1797-
1869), was the eldest daugh-
ter of William Ravenscroft
of County Antrim, Ireland, and
his second wife. Her uncle
was the anti-slavery cam-
paigner William Wilberforce.
In her own right, Henrietta
was both a painter and art
collector and some of her
works were loaned to the
1869 Melbourne Public Lib-
ary Exhibition. She died on
18 August 1869.

(Source: The Argus 21 June 1879;
Biographical notes compiled by the
late Helen Eggleston; A. Thomson
Zainu’ddin, “Stephen, Sir George
(1794 - 1879)”, Australian Dictionary
of Biography, Online Edition 2006
www.adb.online.anu.edu.au)
LIEUTENANT JAMES MALLET BENNERT (1894-1922)

The Australian Dictionary of Biography has an entry on James Mallett Bennett (1894-1922), avian and mechanic, which includes the following extract:

“Early in 1922 the Smith brothers [Ross and Keith] decided to attempt a round-the-world flight; Bennett and Shiers were again chosen as mechanics. The crew planned to take off from England on 25 April, but on 13 April Ross Smith and Bennett were killed during a test flight at Weybridge, when their Vickers Viking Amphibian crashed. The pioneer aviators were mourned as national heroes and their bodies were brought back to Australia. Bennett was buried in St Kilda cemetery on 19 June 1922…”

There is an interesting letter in the Health Department file on St. Kilda Cemetery from the then Secretary of the Trust, Miss E M Thomas. Dated 29 May 1922, the letter reads:

“Sir,
The remains of Lieutenant Bennett will reach these shores about 11th June, and will be accorded a State Funerar. The question of the place of interment has exercised the minds of the local bodies, who are all keenly desirous of according Lieutenant Bennett’s memory the highest honour. The decision has now been arrived at, and concurred in by Lieutenant Bennett’s father, that, as his distinguished son was born and brought up in St Kilda, there could be no more fitting site chosen for his resting place than the St Kilda Cemetery.

The announcement that recently appeared in the press (presumably authorised by the Commonwealth authorities) that, after the State Memorial Service at the Federal Government House, the remains would be conveyed to the St Kilda Cemetery, was evidently issued in the assumption that the Bennett family already held ground in that Cemetery, but such is not the case. The Trustees of the Cemetery are, therefore [sic], now applying to the Public Health Commission to secure an Order-in-Council permitting them to make a free grant to the family of a site 8’ x 8’ at the north end of the central oval in the main drive of the Cemetery, which would provide, in future years, for the interment also of Lieutenant Bennett’s relatives. In view of the shortness of time now allowed to complete the arrangement the Commission’s ready acquiescence in this request and its early application for the necessary Order-in-Council will be regarded as a favour”.

The request was approved by the Health Commission on 30 May followed by the Governor-in-Council on 6 June.


DESCRIPTION OF THE LAND RESERVED

From the Department of Health File on St Kilda General Cemetery:

“Description of the land appropriated as site for a General Cemetery in the parish of Prahran near St Kilda

Bourke 20a Twenty acres parish of Prahran near St Kilda Commencing at a point 3 chains south of the South West corner of portion 63 in the parish of Prahran.

Bounded on the north by a road 3 chains wide bearing east 10 chains 92 links, on the East by a road 1 chain wide bearing south 18 chains 32 links on the south by a road 1 chain wide bearing west 10 chains 92 links and on the west by a road 1 chain wide bearing north 18 chains 32 links.”

(1 chain is equal to:
22 yards
66 feet
20.1168 metres

(Source: Department of Health file on St. Kilda General Cemetery, Part 1 up to 1916)
OUR NEW LOGO...

With the assistance of Grant Cook of Afrenasia, the Friends now have a new logo. Our logo is derived from the female figure that forms part of the impressive Robb monument, located to the left upon entering the Cemetery from Dandenong Road.

An inscription on the pedestal of the monument refers to Doleen Maude La Barte, the only daughter of W. J and E M Robb who was murdered by her husband, Major Thomas Butler La Barte on 17 December 1920 at their home at Moss Vale, New South Wales.

The Argus newspaper of 20 December 1920 told the tragic story:

"Details of the shooting of the wife of Major Thomas Butler La Barte, the shooting of Constable Frederick William Mitchell and the arrest of Major La Barte near Mossvale on Friday night give a story of grim tragedy. Major La Barte is the son of the Rev. T. La Barte, formerly of Brighton. Major La Barte, who was educated at the Brighton Grammar School, is 34 years of age. He served with distinction in France in the Royal Field Artillery, gaining the M.C. Mrs La Barte was well known in Melbourne. She was the only daughter of Mr. W. J. Robb, and was 27 years of age.

Major La Barte was in Mossvale on Friday, and, according to the police account, was drinking heavily. Not long after his return home at about 6 o'clock, the cook at the house was summoned by her mistress's bell. When the cook got to Mrs. La Barte's bedroom she saw Major La Barte holding his wife by the wrist. Mrs. La Barte cried out "Oh, he's shooting me!" Two reports from a revolver followed, and Mrs. La Barte sank down, shot in the head and chest. The neighbours telephoned to the police station at Mossvale, about two miles distant.

Constable Mitchell left for La Barte's on a motor-cycle, and was followed by Sergeant Mackie, Mounted-constable Finch and Constable Eadie. Constable Mitchell entered the house at the front, when shots were heard, and Mitchell fell. He must have died instantly.

When darkness came on, Constable Eadie, who had an electric torch, climbed through the window of the maid's room, while the other constables fired at the adjoining windows. Eadie walked into the living room, and found Major La Barte crouched beside the table, with a gun in one hand. With a leap Eadie reached La Barte, gripped him by the neck, and warded off the gun. While they were struggling other constables rushed in. La Barte was disarmed, and taken into custody.

After reaching the police station, Major La Barte spoke of having pains in his head, but said nothing further. The funeral of Constable Mitchell was largely attended. He left a young widow, but no children."

(Source: The Argus 20 Dec 1920)

...AND WEBSITE!

Co-inciding with the launch of the new logo, the Friends engaged Taskforce—Working Edge to re-design our website—www foskc.org. And the result is spectacular. The new website combines the old vicnet address with the previous site containing biographies from “Nation Builders: Great Lives and Stories from St Kilda General Cemetery” commissioned for the Centenary of Federation celebrations.