



Reverend Duncan Fraser

by Dennis Ward

The Reverend Duncan Fraser [c1826-1912] was a well-educated man who enjoyed healthy debates and was happy to be controversial. He was a “big” man, both in stature and personality.

Born in Scotland, Duncan Fraser arrived in Australia already an ordained minister in 1862. He first came to Northcote in 1869, acting as the Presbyterian minister for an area which extended from Clifton Hill to Morang to Templestowe, although services were held in the church hall of the Primitive Methodists in Northcote. He also conducted services in the original Jika Jika Shire Hall which was adjacent to the Junction Hotel in South Preston.

Reverend Fraser’s first church of his own in Northcote was a timber building built in 1876 near the corner of Cunningham St and High St. He was still the minister in 1890 when it was resolved to move the church to a more central

location. The services were moved temporarily to the Northcote Town Hall while a new church was built on a site in James St which had been acquired by the Church. This church was finished in 1894 and is still used today, while the original church was moved next door and used as a Sunday school until 1906.

However Reverend Fraser left Northcote just a year before the new church opened. The Northcote parish had been aligned with Heidelberg but the two parishes split in the early 1890s and Fraser moved to Heidelberg where his style was more appreciated. Prior to this Reverend Fraser became prominent in many areas of Northcote life.

In the late 1870s rumour of improper financial dealings by the Northcote Council was rife. The Council had come under heavy criticism for their support of the abattoirs and butchers that were plentiful in the area and which were accused of polluting the local atmosphere which was in turn giving Northcote a bad reputation. It was also affecting property prices in the area.

A prominent local butcher, Thomas Mitchell, was a councillor and William Paterson, a bacon curer, had frequently been Shire President. Not surprising then that the council turned its back on the pollution and unhygienic practices of the industry. Suspicion of impropriety was heightened when a mysterious fire destroyed all Northcote's rate books, ledgers and minute books just as an investigation was set to be launched.

Enter Reverend Fraser, who launched a popular campaign to fight council over the issue. Fraser started the Northcote Health League, which met in the Bridge Hotel opposite Fraser's church. One of Fraser's principal motivations for launching the campaign was that the foul odours emanating from Northcote's many meatworks were driving his parishioners to distraction during his sermons. The League planned campaigns to force council to act. They lobbied the local Board of Health and the Central Board of Health and called on the government to tighten legislation.

Most councillors were opposed to the League but slowly public opinion swayed the League's way. The surge towards the League's way of thinking was highlighted when prominent Northcote teacher Richard Tobin allied himself with the league, which led to Northcote breaking away from the Shire of Jika Jika in 1883 and becoming a separate council. Tobin led the petition to the governor requesting the breakaway. This measure had come in response to the 1882 election on to the council of George Plant, who was known to support the meat industry.

The Reverend Fraser would also become involved with the Collingwood Railway League as that organization demanded a direct railway from Melbourne to Collingwood in the late 1880s. The call would be denied by the government at that time as expensive and impractical!

Fraser was also a great man of science and it is believed that he gave the first demonstration of the telephone in Victoria at the Wesleyan School room. For this reason he was particularly proud of his son James who became an engineer. He also had a daughter, Frances, who became headmistress of the prestigious Presbyterian Ladies College in Burwood. Duncan Fraser died in Heidelberg in 1912 at the age of 86.

Sources

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Reverend and Mrs. Duncan Fraser

Date of creation: ca. 1900

1 photographic print: gelatin silver cabinet; on mount 16.5 x 10.7 cm., approx.

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Rev Duncan FRASER grave at Heidelberg Cemetery

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