

2

HOUSE-HUNTING

In architecture as in all other operative arts, the end must direct the operation. The end is to build well. Well building hath three conditions. Commodity, firmness and delight.

Sir Henry Wotton, *Elements of Architecture* (1624)

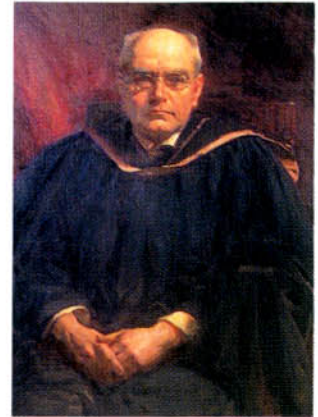
The college may have been firmly established by the agreements and resolutions of February 1927, but it was viewed with suspicion in some quarters and derided as an upstart body. Orm Smith records that some BMA members in Queensland objected to the method of selecting the founders, and claimed that the selection should have been made by the association members in the State. E.S. Jackson, one of the five Queensland founders, was able, it appears, to defuse this situation.

Paradoxically, it was in Victoria that the greatest rancour became evident. There, certain BMA members prompted the Central Branch of the association to call a meeting to consider the motion 'that the formation of the College of Surgeons of Australasia is inimical to the best interests of the profession'. Orm Smith, then aged 24 and one year out from qualification, was present and recalls the occasion:

Sir George Syme agreed to address the meeting. He stood on the stage and gave a short address. Very soon the meeting became a very undignified spectacle. Some of those present, who no doubt had held Syme in the greatest respect... insulted him, even abused him. He had to defend as well as he could two accusations levelled at the College of which he was president.

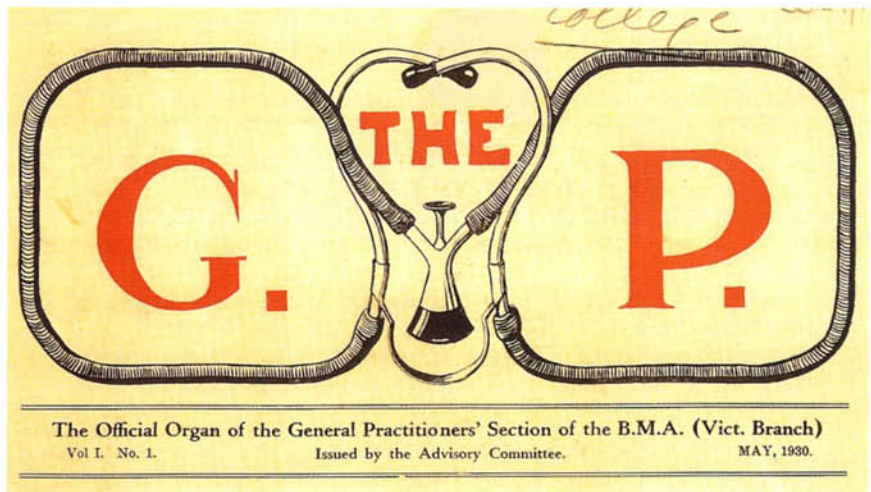
The first was that the formation of the College was unnecessary. The University gave the degree M.B., B.S., and as a Bachelor of Surgery, a man with that degree was entitled to operate. It is incredible that such a view was ever held, but this was a long time ago. The second criticism hurled at Syme was that in the Exordium drawn up by the founders was included a clause, as one of the objects of the College: 'That the public should be *educated* to recognise that the practice of surgery demands adequate and special training.'¹

This was, we may feel, the ugly side of the early days of Syme's presidency and must have been hurtful to him, because he was a reserved man, not given to partisan debate. Sir Benjamin Rank has written of him that he was 'a man of few words who managed always



Though highly regarded hitherto, Syme could 'not escape calumny' in the early days of the College that he led.

The masthead of the 'G.P.' journal showed a stethoscope in a twist. Some members of the profession were themselves quite bitter and twisted after the formation of the College.



to maintain [an] objective stance... he was universally trusted... and always the logical choice as chairman... reserved and reticent... but for the fact that Syme's character was beyond reproach, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons as it stands today might never have become airborne'.²

Criticism of the College was not confined to this occasion. In May 1930 a pamphlet or newsletter entitled *The G.P.* and describing itself as 'the Official Organ of the General Practitioners' Section of the B.M.A. (Vict. Branch)' was indignant because 'slurs were cast' at the College meeting held recently in Melbourne. Certainly a paper on the evils of fee-splitting, as reported in the *Melbourne Herald*, came across as calculated to inflame the situation, but it is unclear how much was reportage and how much editorial pleading. The *Herald* wrote:

It is not overstating the case to say that certain physicians are not above sharing a patient's tonsils with a friendly surgeon, by way of splitting the fee... This transfusion of cash revives many a sick bank account, a result which apparently justifies the manoeuvre in the eyes of the two professionals concerned.³

This was anathema to the General Practitioners' Section. 'If he had his way,' a Dr McRae Russell was quoted as saying, 'he would force the College of Surgeons to divulge the author of that article, so that he could be socially and professionally ostracised.'⁴ And tarred and feathered, perhaps...

Back in 1927 Syme must have been rather happier with a letter he received from Professor Colin Mackenzie. At this time, as part of the development of Canberra from a tract of farmland into the federal capital city, the Federal government was building a National Museum of Zoology⁵ for Mackenzie, adjacent to the site of the future National University and close to the hospital. In his letter Mackenzie



In 1927 Canberra was a capital city in the making. The first Federal Parliament there was opened by HRH The Duke of York (later King George VI).

conjectured that the government might grant the new College a site for a headquarters, and his suggestion was reinforced by Sir Neville Howse, then Minister for Health in the Federal government.

Howse was Australia's first (and its only medical) VC. His award came in 1900 when he was a surgeon-lieutenant in the South African war, and in the First World War he had been medical director-general. He was a foundation Fellow of the College and a man of immense standing in the community.

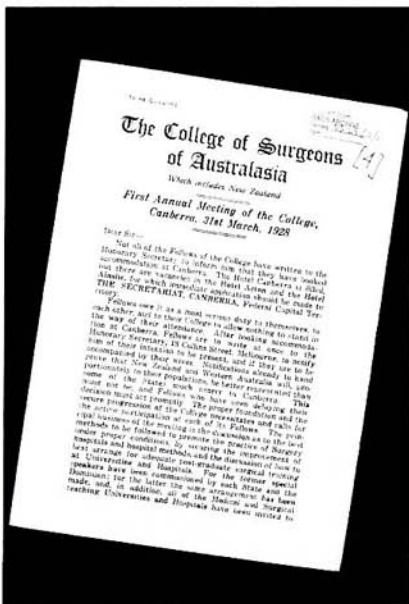
Accordingly, Syme and Devine visited Canberra late in 1927 and discussed the possible reservation of a site with the Chief Commissioner, Sir John Butters. He pointed out on the map a five-acre area which was likely to be earmarked for medical and scientific purposes, and offered to recommend to the Federal government that a portion of this area be reserved for the College. His visitors were driven to the site in question, adjacent to Mackenzie's own zoology museum; they were much impressed.

When the College held its first annual meeting in Canberra at the end of March 1928, therefore, it was natural enough that a visit to the site should be included in the programme. The Saturday afternoon was largely devoted to the formal opening by Lord Stonehaven, the governor-general, and to presentations on the English, Edinburgh, Irish and American Colleges.⁶ On Sunday 1 April there was a picnic at the confluence of the Cotter and Murrumbidgee rivers. Those needing transport were invited to put their names on a list; those with space in their cars to select names from it.

Monday was largely given over to business, including a discussion on measures to achieve the aims of the new College, but also the triad: 'Site (which has been marked out and will be visited) - Building - Funds'. The visitors liked what they saw - and then the matter ran wildly out of control.



Sir Neville Howse was a foundation Fellow and a strong supporter of the College. He had won the Victoria Cross as a surgeon-lieutenant in 1900 and was now federal Minister for Health.



During the 1928 Canberra meeting, Fellows visited the proposed College site, which they came close to accepting. Here are Newton and Newland (left); Devine and McGavin (right).

Left: The notice of the College's 1928 Canberra meeting gives a glimpse into the social and surgical conditions of the time.



Ralph Worrall, who was one of the Founders and served for four years on the Council, seconded Maguire's motion to build in Canberra.

As far back as mid-1926 a number of the Sydney surgeons, in discussing the future of the college they were contemplating, foresaw that in time 'a central control might be established at Canberra' (and, in passing, that the projected University of Canberra might provide a mechanism for achieving uniformity of higher surgical degrees as between the several Australian universities). Now, it seemed, the outcome they had envisaged was within reach. F.A. Maguire of Sydney moved, and his colleague Ralph Worrall seconded, a motion:

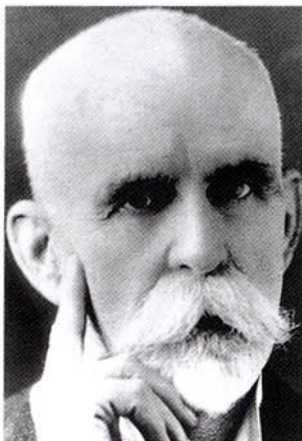
that this meeting of the Fellows of the College of Surgeons of Australasia which includes New Zealand, held on the site of the College accepted by the Council from the Commission of the Federal Capital Territory, desires to express its confidence in Council's undertaking to build on this site.

To what extent such an undertaking had been given is unclear; but (as Orm Smith records) 'there was no amendment and, on being put to the meeting, the motion was declared by the President to have been carried unanimously. The declaration was received with cheering!'

Howse compounded the enthusiasm of the gathering by a suggestion that Fellows follow the President's action – it is uncertain, at this distance, to what action he was referring – by taking £100 debentures to form the building fund of the College. No fewer than 25 thereupon did so. They may have found his invitation hard to resist: he was a commanding figure, and it is recorded that he approached the subject by declaiming 'Stand up any one who won't contribute...'

The Council woke next morning with a revolutionary hangover. It met early, then reported, prior to the resumption of the scientific programme, its decision that it could not 'undertake building operations in the immediate future', that it could not pay interest on debentures taken up at that stage and must therefore postpone the whole subject of debentures, but that monies subscribed would be 'allotted to the Endowment Fund to further the general aims and objects of the College'. A donor had the right to earmark a donation for a special purpose within these objects.

With admirable foresight Kenny had (on the Monday) adapted the transport list from the picnic to serve as a register of contributions. It is an interesting list: a number of euphoric offers of debentures are crossed out and more modest sums substituted by way of gift. Louis Barnett, at the top, had 'already announced' (but we are not told what he had announced); J.S. Elliott in second place promised a professional 25 guineas; several who followed him offered their sums in plebeian pounds. Gillespie from Western Australia doubled their offers with £50, R.B. Wade of Sydney, a future president, reverted to guineas and W. Kent Hughes of Melbourne topped the list with 50



Kenny adapted the picnic schedule to serve as a list of financial promises.

HOUSE-HUNTING

guineas! Howse, repenting perhaps of his eagerness of the day before, subscribed five guineas.

Not long after the Canberra meeting one of the Victorian founders, Sir James Barrett, wrote to each member of the Council and to the secretary asking that the Council give his argument formal consideration. He also asked that his letter be read at the next annual meeting, at which he intended to give notice of motion concerning the Canberra proposal. In his letter he recalled having suggested, in Dunedin in 1927, that the president be given authority 'to ascertain whether a site was available, and if so on what terms'. He had not entertained the idea that a site would be determined without wider consultation. At the Canberra meeting he had been prevented, by the need to accommodate Howse's speech, from presenting his views. He had thereafter learned for the first time of the Council's commitment but had been prevented, out of respect for the president and Council, from arguing against such a commitment. He had imagined that Howse was speaking with the endorsement of Council, but he was 'convinced that the majority of Fellows do not want a building which might well become a white elephant, and certainly do not want it in Canberra'. He foresaw two ways out of the dilemma: a motion to rescind 'the hasty resolution passed at the site', or a referendum on the various aspects of a building programme - whether to build, if so for what purposes and where, and finally what sum should be spent. But he concluded that the Council, and not an individual, should be the body to act in the matter.

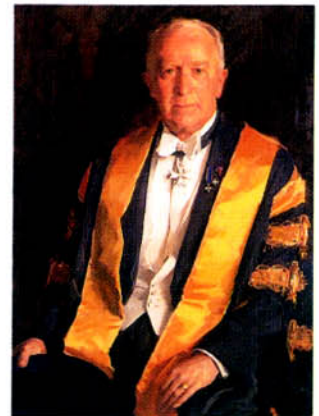
Barrett was not present in Sydney for the 1929 annual meeting;⁸ his letter was duly read, but Canberra was a dead issue by then. Instead, Syme stated that the Council had decided that the College needed an office of its own, and a room in the building at 6 Collins Street in Melbourne was rented, thus relieving Kenny of the need to have his own rooms double as the College office.

At the 1931 annual meeting, also in Sydney, the Canberra proposal was finally buried, when Fellows were informed 'that Council, for many reasons, had declined the offer of the Commonwealth Government to provide a site for the College headquarters in Canberra'. In a handsome gesture two Sydney Fellows, H.R.G. Poate and A.J. Aspinall, proposed that Melbourne (the centre of the south-east Australian seaboard, which determined inter-state transport in those days - and, for that matter, as convenient as anywhere for the New Zealand link) should be the site of the College headquarters. The executive was duly authorised to seek a Melbourne site.

Its first approach was to the Royal Society of Victoria, which occupied what Orm Smith described as a 'small but dignified building' on a triangular site bounded by Latrobe, Exhibition and Victoria Streets, along the awkward interface between the grid pattern of the central city and the larger, but skewed, pattern of streets to the north. The

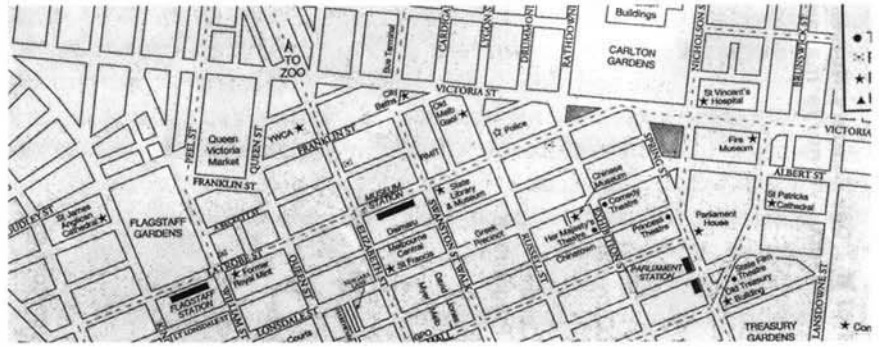


Sir James Barrett had a reputation for elucidating a subject; he was 'convinced that the majority of Fellows do not want a building... in Canberra'.



H.R.G. Poate of Sydney (later Sir Hugh Poate and president 1945-47) proposed Melbourne as the permanent home of the College.

The interface between Melbourne's central city and inner suburban grid patterns is such as to create a number of irregular blocks. The College flirted with the triangle at the top of Exhibition Street before securing its quadrilateral site one block to the east.



Royal Society was prepared to make a portion of its land available to the College, but stipulated that any building erected thereon must include a lecture hall which it could use for its own meetings. On this rock the project foundered.

With hindsight it is possible to be relieved that the College did not bind itself to a small, shared building on a congested site. Its attention turned instead to another irregular site, this time quadrilateral, further along the 'interface' and bounded by Spring, Nicholson and Victoria Streets and a small lane which bore, successively, the names of Flint and Evelyn Streets before becoming accepted as a mere prolongation of Lonsdale Street, through to meet Albert Street.

This plot had originally been earmarked for a future market. It was later promised by Governor La Trobe to the education department of the young colony by means of a Crown grant, 'a consideration of which is the payment of a quit rent of one peppercorn yearly for ever on demand'. In 1852 a Model High School was built on the site (one year after Scotch College was established across the road, on the west side of Spring Street). The high school survived for 80 years, before being condemned. At this point, in 1932, the College executive committee entered into negotiations with the Victorian administration.

At this time the Hogan ministry was in office. One of the College

Originally intended for a market, the Spring Street block had accommodated the Model High School for some eighty years when it came into the hands of the College.



HOUSE-HUNTING

legends has the Premier consulting Devine, and Devine, knife in hand, murmuring, 'Now, about this matter of a site for the College...' Legend aside,⁹ the College was offered the southern part of the quadrilateral on which stood the now vacant Model High School, for 50 years at a peppercorn rental, with a right of renewal for a further 50 years; but there were two conditions attached to the offer.

In the first place, the College was to take over the northern part of the site for ten years, attending to tidying, fencing and landscaping; in the second it was required, within these ten years from April 1932, to spend £15,000 on building projects, whether new building or extensions and renovations. Having little option, the College signed the lease on 14 April 1932; but then there was a change of government, and the incoming Argyle ministry modified the terms so that the College gained its 50-year renewable lease over the whole area, while the government offered to construct (and the City Council was instructed to maintain) the necessary gardens at no cost to the College. The advent of the Argyle ministry had turned a slightly grudging agreement into a handsome one. As the 1940 College handbook observed :

This statesmanlike action meant that the College would be able to devote to educational purposes money which, otherwise, would have been spent in the construction and maintenance of the gardens.

A structural survey of the old school building revealed that it was beyond refurbishing to provide the College with the premises it needed, and indeed was fit only for demolition. The Council was thus faced, five years into its life, with a building project.

It swallowed hard and set to work. It commissioned Leighton Irwin, a leading Melbourne architect,¹⁰ to draw plans, and it set up a building fund. Irwin wasted no time, and the October 1932 issue of the journal showed an illustration of his design: a squat central tower, faced with a portico (Orm Smith calls it a colonnade, but the terms are effectively synonymous) and a pair of two-storey wings, with a basement.

Irwin's design impressed the Council and was approved by Fellows at the annual meeting in Sydney in April 1933. But it was costed at £13,000, which was beyond the College's means, and it was decided to delete the portico. This news prompted Dr A.E. (later Sir) Rowden White, a prominent physician in the city, to donate £1,000 towards its retention in the design. He explained that this rather splendid gesture was made not so much as a member of the profession as because he, a citizen of Melbourne, felt all possible advantage should be taken of a commanding site. (His generosity had its rewards when the young Royal Australasian College of Physicians – of which he was a foundation councillor, and vice-president 1944-46 – held meetings at the College in Melbourne.) White's gift was augmented by one of £500 from F.J. Cato, whose son E.T. Cato MC was an early Fellow of the College.



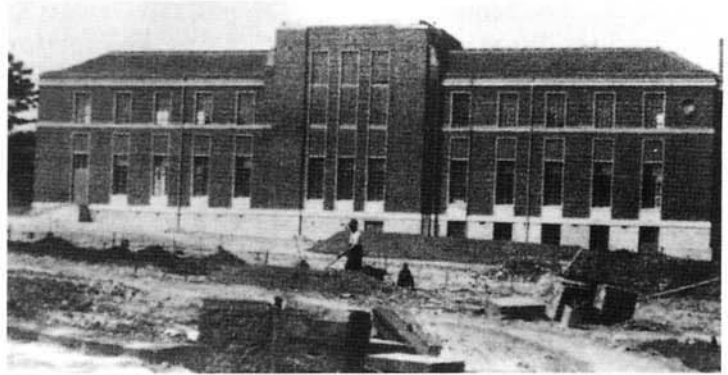
It was during the Hogan ministry that the College obtained its site at the top of Spring Street.



The terms of the College's lease were amended to a level that might be called generous when Sir Stanley Argyle became Premier.



The architect's drawing shows the building with an entrance a little more elaborate than the finished structure. But for the generosity of Dr Rowden White and Mr Cato, the portico would have been eliminated altogether in the circumstances of the early 1930s.



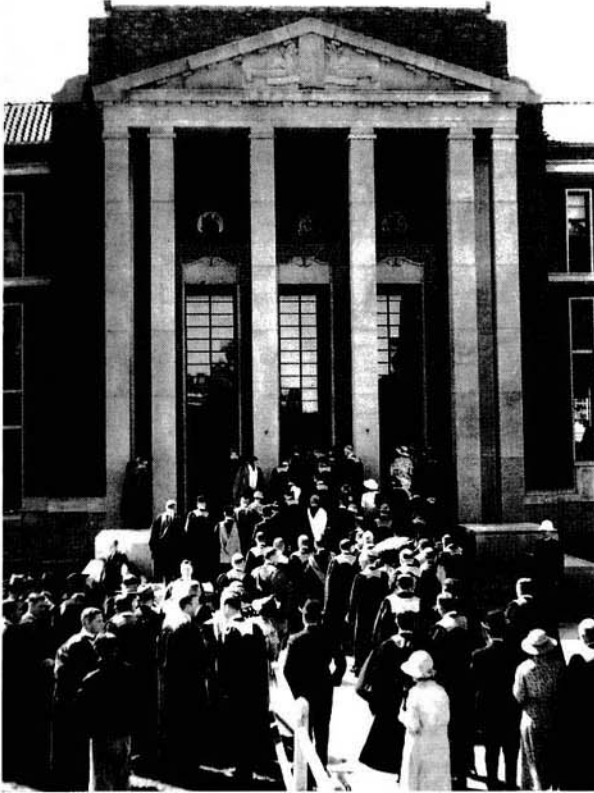
Construction of the building proceeded through 1934. This view is from near the corner of Spring and Victoria Streets. It was taken by Julian Smith (father of Orm) who was both a surgeon and a noted photographer, and whose portrait studies adorn the College building today.

The portico was thus able to be retained in the design, though a row of ornate balconies inside it was abandoned. Once the old school buildings were demolished, construction work was able to begin in 1934, and attention was given to the form and timing of the official opening. The building was due for completion early in 1935, which was already due to be a notable year in Melbourne: the city's own centenary celebrations were to be held in the early part of the year, and in September the British Medical Association annual general meeting was to be held in Melbourne, one of the relatively rare 'off-shore' annual meetings of the parent body.

The BMA Council in London suggested that to open the building at a ceremony 'back-to-back' with its visit would be a happy conjunction. The College Council, however, recognised several problems: in the first place, Melbourne's Lord Mayor and Council were eager that this new architectural showpiece be opened during

In its early days, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians was able to hold its council meetings at the College. This photograph was taken in 1942: Sir Rowden White, with bow tie, is at the centre of the right row; Sir Trent Champion de Crespigny is in the chair.





Left: It was a brilliant day for the opening of the College building. The name of the College was not displayed over the entrance until after the Second World War.

Above: College personalities and overseas visitors at the opening. From left: Edward Archibald of Montreal, Robin Syme, E.D. Ahern (back to camera), F.P. Sandes, C.F.M. Saint of South Africa, A.L. Kenny, Sir Louis Barnett, Donald Balfour of the Mayo, John Fraser of Edinburgh and Dean Lewis of Johns Hopkins.

the city's own period of celebrations. And, apart from the fact that the man who pays the gardener deserves consideration in any circumstances, the Lord Mayor had been generous (or astute) enough to propose that certain visitors for the opening might be designated 'official guests' of the city.

The Council also had some qualms about the possibility that the College opening might become a mere supporting feature in the BMA's programme, but also, and more seriously, it had invited the president of the English College, Sir Holburt Waring Bt CBE, to perform the opening ceremony. He had accepted but could not come in September.

The opening date was therefore set for 4 March 1935. The final cost was £15,000, but the generosity of Fellows in contributing to the building fund, and of the benefactors mentioned above, allowed the new building to be opened free of debt. A large number of invitations were sent to eminent overseas surgeons and, although relatively few were able to attend, there was still a goodly attendance of international figures from the world of surgery. Apart from Waring himself, Sir D'Arcy Power KBE came from London, John Fraser MC (later Sir John, Bt)¹¹ and Henry Wade CMG DSO (later Sir Henry) from Edinburgh, E.W. Archibald from Montreal, from the USA Donald C. Balfour from the Mayo and Dean Lewis of Johns Hopkins, and from South Africa C.F.M. Saint CBE of 'Johannesburg'.¹²



Above: Professor Wood Jones delivered a memorable Syme oration to round off a notable day.



Right: Sir Holburt Waring unlocks the door of the College building; Sir Henry Newland is behind him.

The building itself, completed ahead of time at the end of 1934, had attracted two awards: the Street Medal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects (as the best building of the year) and the Sulman Prize for architecture. To Wotton's qualities of commodity and firmness it could now claim to have added 'delight'.

The daytime opening ceremony attracted a large crowd, and in the evening (to allow the last word to Orm Smith, who was there)

the fourth Syme Oration was delivered by Professor Frederick Wood-Jones [*sic*, for Frederic Wood Jones] FRS. It was a most colourful ceremony. The visitors in their variety of brilliantly coloured academic robes provided a great spectacle. The handsome, dark-haired orator with his beautiful speaking voice spoke, unaided by a note of any kind, for exactly one hour. The title of his oration was 'The Master Surgeon'. It was many, many years before any other Syme Oration approached his in quality.

NOTES

1. Smith, J.O. (1972), *op. cit.*
2. Rank, B.K. (1975), *Jerry Moore and some of his contemporaries*, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, p.97.
3. *Melbourne Herald*, 25 March 1930.

HOUSE-HUNTING

4. *The G.P.: official organ of the General Practitioners' Section of the B.M.A. (Vict. Branch)*, May 1930, p.10.

5. It was later named the Australian Institute of Anatomy. It closed in 1987, and the building now houses the National Film and Sound Archive.

6. Hamilton Russell spoke of the English College's history (after all, when he worked as Lister's house surgeon his chief was a councillor and being touted as a potential president of that College); R. Scot Skirving of the Edinburgh College; Leslie Cowlshaw, a Sydney physician and bibliophile, contributed a paper on the Irish College, which was read by Ralph Worrall; and Louis Barnett described the young American College which had so stimulated his thinking.

7. In the *Journal*, 1:159.

8. Russell Howard, in the *Founders* book, comments that Barrett, although a Founder, was not seriously committed to the young College. He was, however, a close friend of Hugh Devine, and they shared an interest in native fauna. Lady White, who grew up with the Devine children and joined them for holidays at Flinders, on the Mornington peninsula, recalls that Barrett (who had a licence to keep and breed native animals) shared his breeding surplus with Devine, so that wallabies and koalas were among the Flinders attractions. She remembers that when a koala was handled it treated the handler as a tree, grasping with forelegs round the neck, hind legs the waist, while exuding a strong flavour of eucalyptus. She also recalls the occasion when Devine brought an ailing wallaby back to town for treatment: it escaped down Toorak Road, a busy thoroughfare even in those days. Chased by car and finally cornered, it cheerfully hopped back into the car and allowed itself to be repatriated. Life in the Devine household was not all serious.

9. It is not altogether legend, even though it involved Hogan's successor as Premier – and a table knife. Devine in his memoirs (*RACS Archives*, p.7) recorded that Sir Stanley Argyle was a close personal friend with whom he lunched 'almost every day for years'. On one occasion he reported to Argyle that the College had enough money to build a single-storey building on the Hogan site and regretted it was impossible to build more while assuming responsibility for the gardens. 'His reply astonished me,' observed Devine. He said, 'The Government will give you the northern half of this Model School site if your College will build its headquarters on the centre of the block', and went on to offer to establish and care for the gardens.

10. Irwin was president of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects at the time.

11. Sir John Fraser's son James, 2nd baronet, would become president of the Edinburgh College in the 1980s and a good friend of Australasia, as so many UK presidents have been. In 1984 I had the pleasure of presenting him for admission as an honorary FRACS.

12. Johannesburg, according to Orm Smith, but Sir Benjamin Rank, in his *Guide to the items of historical and aesthetic interest* of 1966 names Saint as professor of surgery in Capetown. Saint's gift to the College was the sundial that stands in the pathway leading up to the front entrance.

The sundial given by C.F.M. Saint stands in the pathway that leads to the front door of the College.



Sir Stanley Argyle's offer to establish and maintain the College site (since named 'College of Surgeons Gardens') was of considerable importance to a young institution.

