

1851-1890

PALMER, SIR JAMES FREDERICK (1803-1871), medical practitioner and politician, was born on 7 June 1803 at Great Torrington, Devon, England, fourth son of Rev. John Palmer, nephew of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and his wife Jane, daughter of William Johnson. He was articled to Dr John Gunning, surgeon-in-chief of the army, and in 1824 became a house surgeon at St George's Hospital (M.A.C.S., 1826). For some years he practised in London, living in Golden Square, and became senior surgeon at St James's Dispensary. In 1835-37 he edited in four volumes the work of the anatomist, John Hunter, and became a fellow of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society. On 21 November 1831 he had married Isabella, third daughter of Dr Gunning, then inspector-general of hospitals.

Palmer twice contested vacancies for surgical appointments without success. Disappointed and annoyed by the second defeat, he determined to migrate. He arrived at Sydney with his wife in September 1840 and registered as a medical practitioner on 21 February 1842. He soon moved to Melbourne but set up as a cordial manufacturer and then as a wine merchant. In 1847-54 he held pastoral interests in common with James Henty and Francis Murphy [qq.v.]. He also became local chairman of directors of the Liverpool and London Fire and Life Assurance Co.

Palmer made his home at Richmond near the Yarra and soon established Palmer's Punt (near Hawthorn Bridge), thus making a steady income from the woodcarters of the Boroondara district. In 1851 largely at his instigation the punt was displaced by a wooden bridge. With prosperity he built a new house, Burwood, in Hawthorn near the bridge. The property was later bought by George Coppin [q.v.] and later still by Sir William McPherson (1865-1932); it became the Invergowrie Homecraft Hostel.

Palmer was mayor of Melbourne in 1845-46. In September 1848 he was elected one of the five to represent the Port Phillip District in the Legislative Council of New South Wales, but resigned in June 1849. In 1851 he was returned to the Victorian Legislative Council for the Western District seat of Normanby, Dundas and Follett and was elected first Speaker. He served on the select committee which drafted the Constitution in 1853 and on the committee that proposed the Act for creating the University of Melbourne. In 1856, having retained his office in the old council and having been elected for Western Province, he became first president of the new Legislative Council and in 1857 was knighted. He presided over the council until 1870 when he did not seek re-election.

Outside parliament Palmer was prominent in many fields. He was an original trustee of the Public Library and was associated with the Melbourne Hospital from the earliest proposals for its foundation. At a public meeting on 5 March 1845 he moved the motion that the hospital 'is hereby formed' and then served on its building and management committees. As mayor he delivered the main address when Sir Charles Hotham laid the foundation stone of the hospital. Palmer predicted that the hospital would become a centre of medical education and research which would benefit rich and poor alike. He was vice-president in 1851-65 and president until ill health forced him to resign in 1870, but his association went far beyond that of a conventional office-bearer. In 1856 he unsuccessfully suggested an endowment of land for the hospital -to cope with its serious financial problems.

Palmer was an active and devout Anglican layman, but in the field of education, where his contribution was important, he was identified with the National system. He was chairman of the Board of National Education while it lasted in 1851-62 and became chairman of the Board of Education in 1863. At the royal commission in 1866 he defended the 1862 educational compromise as the most satisfactory situation for the moment, argued that withdrawal of aid from church schools should be gradual and strongly defended the 'payment by results' system.

Palmer died at Burwood on 23 April 1871, leaving an estate worth some £13,000. His high repute rested on character and city. La Trobe in supporting the recommendation for a knighthood had described him as 'a gentleman by birth, education and profession. Sometimes he pulled against, more often for, but I always respected him as honest'. He was hard-hitting at times; one letter to Sir George Gipps was returned with the rebuke that it was 'couched in language studiously offensive'. To Westgarth [q.v.] he was an 'old Tory' but with 'just a trace of the oddly positive in him'. Though perhaps not of outstanding ability, his series of presidencies and the remarkable range of his activities indicate his tact, common sense, breadth of interest and earnestness of purpose.

Garryowen (E. Finn), *The chronicles of early Melbourne* (Melb, 1888); E. Lai' Armstrong, *The book of the Public Library . . . 1856-1906* (Melb, 1906); J. A. Allan, 'The Red Lion Inn', *VHM*, 21 (1945-46); *Argus*, 24, 26, 27 Apr 1871.

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