



Colonel H. FINN

[1852 – 1924]



Colonel Finn was President of the Club in 1900 ¹

Henry “Harry” Francis Finn was born on 6 December 1852 at Tenterden, Kent, England. He was the son of Samuel Finn [1811-1882] a tailor born and died in Kent; and his wife Elizabeth Frances Austen (née Hilder) [1807-1891] also born and died in Kent. They had married in 1835 in Rye, Sussex and Harry was the youngest of their 10 children (all born and most died in Kent):

¹ Colonel Finn’s term of office as President is explained by the following. Under the Club’s original 1892 “Rules” or “Constitution”, the Presidency of the Club alternated “as of right” between the senior Army and Naval Commanders in the Colony (and later the State) of Queensland. A separate elected position of “Chairman of Committee” also existed who, as implied by its name, actively managed the Club through its volunteer Committee Members – including Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. In 1910 the Rules were amended to reflect a governance model, which has essentially existed ever since, where the elected President chaired the Club Committee.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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- Sarah / Sally [1836-1872] Did not marry
- Frank [b.1837] Grocer's Assistant. Married Caroline [b.1836] and had a son and three daughters
- John [b.1839]
- Elizabeth [b.1840]
- Edmund [b.1841]
- Alfred [b.1843]
- Mary [1845-1921] Draper's Assistant. Did not marry
- Eliza [b.1847] Did not marry
- Edgar [b.1849]

Harry married Belfast-born Catherine (née Scott) [1862-1941] in Dublin in 1886. They had two daughters and a son:

- Kathleen Hilder [1887- 1941+] Born in Colchester and died in Sydney. She married Reverend Canon George Gordon O'Keefe OBE ² in Brisbane in 1941. He was formerly Headmaster at All Souls School Charters Towers (from 1928) and Secretary of the Eliza Hall Trust (from 1951) His portrait was a finalist in the 1969 Archibald Prize.
- Moya Scott [1899-1943] Born Bangalore and died Sydney. Remained unmarried living with her mother after Harry's death.
Both daughters returned to England with their parents in 1906 and returned to Australia with them in 1912.
- Accurate records could not be sourced on their son.

Harry was educated at home at Tenterden and joined the British Army in 1871 as a private in the 9th (Queen's Royal) Lancers at Aldershot.

During the Afghanistan War of 1878-80 he participated in severe fighting, was mentioned in dispatches, and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for bravery. ³

After almost ten years in the ranks, Harry Finn was commissioned Second Lieutenant in the newly formed 21st Hussars in 1881 and promoted Lieutenant in 1882 when he was also appointed instructor of musketry to the regiment and in 1884 became Adjutant. He was still Adjutant when the regiment was sent to India in 1887, when he was promoted Captain. From 1890 he filled several general staff appointments at Bangalore in the Madras command, and in Burma, and was promoted Major in 1894 before returning to his regiment in 1898.

Finn's regiment was that year converted to the 21st (Empress of India) Lancers and sent to Egypt, where it took part in the Nile Expedition into the Sudan in August. Finn commanded the Lancers' left wing during their famous charge at Omdurman ⁴ on 2 September and was mentioned in dispatches and promoted brevet Lieutenant-Colonel in November.

In 1899, he accompanied his regiment to Newbridge, Ireland, but was there only three months before he was offered, and accepted, the post of commandant of the Queensland Defence Force with local

² Second Lieutenant G.G. O'Keefe AIF 1917-19 UK.

³ Instituted in 1854 as an award to Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and men of the British Army for "distinguished, gallant and good conduct in the field". For all ranks below commissioned officer, it was the second highest award for gallantry in action after the Victoria Cross. After 1918 recipients were entitled to the post-nominal letters DCM. Last awarded in 1993.

⁴ Lieutenant W.S Churchill, 4th Hussars, rode with the unit in this action in which it earned three Victoria Crosses. "Omdurman" was the only Battle Honour held by the Regiment (disbanded in 1921).

rank of Colonel. He arrived to take command on 11 April 1900. During his tenure in the post the Australian colonies were federated, and Finn was selected to preside over a Commonwealth Defence Pay Committee which met in Sydney in 1901 to consider rates of pay and allowances for the forces.

Finn was then offered the post of Commandant in New South Wales with local rank of Brigadier General and began duty on 1 January 1902. In terms of seniority, he was second-in-command of the Commonwealth Military Forces following the arrival in 1902 of another British officer, Major General Sir Edward Hutton ⁵, as general officer commanding. Hutton considered Finn 'an experienced and valuable officer' and specifically named him to the membership of a board of advice which he proposed in 1904 be established to co-ordinate the functioning of the Defence Department under the Minister.

In other respects, Finn's association with Hutton was not so happy. In April 1904 Senator Lieutenant-Colonel John Neild complained that, following speeches made by him in the Senate, Hutton and Finn had attempted to have him retired from his militia appointment. A select committee called Finn to give evidence on 17 May; its report in October exonerated him but not Hutton. Finn was also called to give evidence in June 1904 before another Senate select committee inquiring into whether an officer retrenched by Hutton had been justly treated.

He was granted brevet rank of Colonel in the British Army in February 1904. In October, he was a member of the Commonwealth Defence Committee which assembled in Melbourne and, after Hutton's departure for England at the expiration of his appointment on 15 November, Finn assumed temporary command of the Commonwealth Military Forces. On 24 December, he was appointed Inspector General, the Commonwealth's new senior military post, but retained powers of the G.O.C. pending the establishment of a Military Board of Administration. He was given local and temporary rank of Major General from February 1905.

As Inspector General, in 1905 Finn became Chairman of the Promotions Board, and President of the Commonwealth Defence Committee - charged with drafting a Commonwealth defence scheme. He also sought to discharge conscientiously his duties of examining the condition of the country's defence works, the efficiency of the troops and preparedness for war, by undertaking extensive visits to all states. Although allotted a staff officer, he had no aide-de-camp and no clerical staff; none the less he produced detailed and comprehensive observations concerning the efficiency of the forces for 1905.

Finn's efforts went largely unappreciated by the government of the day, although in the Senate in 1906 he was described as 'the ablest military man in the Commonwealth' and a man possessing 'grit, determination, ability, and backbone'. Defence Minister Thomas Playford, however, was critical of Finn. It seems probable that frustration and animosity with the Minister were behind Finn's decision to retire, ostensibly on grounds of ill health. He left for England on 3 September 1906 on leave in anticipation of the expiry of his appointment at the end of the year.

Coming to Australia in the prime of his life, Finn made a strong impression as a professional soldier; among British officers who served in the Commonwealth his influence was second only to that of Hutton. Remarkable at the time as one of the few men to have risen through the ranks of the British Army—he could claim to have served in all ranks from private to major general - Finn's breezy, informal, and direct manner made him well liked by the men he commanded. He did much to infuse enthusiasm into young and inexperienced troops and set an example of soldierly bearing and conduct.

⁵ Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Thomas Henry Hutton, KCB, KCMG, DL, FRGS [1848-1923] Commandant NSW Military Forces 1893-96; General Officer Commanding the Militia of Canada 1898-1900; General Officer Commanding the Australian Military Forces 1901-04.

He was prominent among the small group of professional officers who did much to lay the foundations upon which the reputation of the Australian Imperial Force was built.



General Finn with his wife Catherine and daughter Kathleen c.1900

He was appointed C.B. in 1907 and upon his retirement that year after a brief period of half-pay, he engaged in commerce in London.

In 1912 Finn was nominated by Mrs Walter Hall as secretary of the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust in Sydney, and he held this post from December 1912 until his death. He was also private secretary to Sir Gerald Strickland,⁶ Governor of New South Wales in 1913-17; and in 1923-24 to the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir William Cullen⁷.

Colonel Harry Finn was President of the Club in 1900 while Commandant Queensland Defence Force 1900-01. The United Service Institution, as it was by then, tendered a complimentary dinner, on 14 May 1900, to welcome both Colonel Harry Finn as the new Commandant, Queensland Defence Force and Captain W.R. Creswell who arrived at the same time to head the Marine Defence Force. Colonel Finn became president of the Institution in the year of his arrival and Captain Creswell after him in 1901, and again in 1903.

Major General Harry Finn CB, DCM died in St Luke's Private Hospital, Sydney, on 24 June 1924.

Finn was buried with full military honours in South Head cemetery. The funeral cortège was so large that it took two and half hours for the last mourners to arrive at the cemetery following the service at his Point Piper home. A beautifully sculptured white marble Celtic cross, funded by public subscription, was erected over his grave.

⁶ Gerald Paul Joseph Cajetan Carmel Antony Martin Strickland, 6th Count della Catena, 1st Baron Strickland, GCMG [1861-1940]. A Maltese and British politician and peer, who served as Prime Minister of Malta, Governor of the Leeward Islands, Governor of Tasmania, Governor of Western Australia and Governor of New South Wales, in addition to sitting successively in the House of Commons and House of Lords in the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

⁷ Sir William Portus Cullen KCMG, KC [1855-1935] Barrister. MLA 1891-94; MLC 1895-1910; 7th Chief Justice of New South Wales 1910-25; Lieutenant-Governor of New South Wales 1910-30; Chancellor of the University of Sydney 1914-34.



Companion of the Order of the Bath; Distinguished Conduct Medal; Afghanistan Medal 1878-80 with clasp 'KABUL'; Queen's Sudan Medal 1896-98; Khedive's Sudan Medal 1897 with clasp 'KHARTOUM'

Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports, and sundry documents
- Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 8, (MUP), 1981
- AWM, DVA, NAA archives