

Cultural Advice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this website contains names, images, and voices of deceased persons.

In addition, some articles contain terms or views that were acceptable within mainstream Australian culture in the period in which they were written, but may no longer be considered appropriate.

These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of The Australian National University.

Older articles are being reviewed with a view to bringing them into line with contemporary values but the original text will remain available for historical context.

Hide message

Wright, William Henry (1816–1877)

by **L. J. Blake**

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William Henry Wright (1816-1877), gold commissioner and public servant, was born at Sandhurst, Berkshire, England, son of Charles Wright, army officer, and his wife Harriet, née Frere. Educated at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he joined the 50th Regiment in January 1833 and served in New Zealand and under Major **Joseph Anderson** at Norfolk Island. In 1838 he sold out of the service, qualified as a surveyor in New South Wales and on 27 July joined the Survey Department under Major **Thomas Livingstone Mitchell**. On 13 June 1843 he became commissioner of crown lands for Wellington District. At the end of 1846 he became commissioner of crown lands for the Wimmera in the Port Phillip District.

In 1852 Wright took charge of Mount Alexander goldfield at a salary of £900 and set up Central Camp near Castlemaine to control a population of some 25,000. His staff was inexperienced and his duties 'onerous and varied' with the 'most inadequate means either in material or men', but he worked so tirelessly and effectively that Lieutenant-Governor **Charles La Trobe** appointed him chief commissioner of the goldfields on 1 May. He warned La Trobe of the defects of the 1851 licence system and opposed the compulsory licence hunts which were provocative to the diggers; however, his flexibility kept the situation under control.

Wright was instructed to make his headquarters in Melbourne in March 1853 and he was a non-elective member of the Legislative Council from August that year until March 1856. Goldfields unrest continued in 1853, with political activists talking of revolution, but Wright, with such commissioners as **John Bull** and **Joseph Panton**, kept protest meetings in hand. On 13 September 1854 Lieutenant-Governor **Sir Charles Hotham** ordered twice-weekly licence hunts despite Wright's advice that 'extreme forbearance and conciliation' were essential. As troubles mounted at Ballarat, he warned Hotham on 2 December that 'two thousand miners have offered to defend the Camp should their services be required', but the governor bypassed Wright for Commissioner **Robert Rede**. The military attack on the Eureka Stockade occurred on 3 December 1854.

In November Wright had been appointed a member of the commission of inquiry into the goldfields. He defended his staff but his department was abolished, and on 1 July 1855 he became secretary of the Gold Department, which he described as a 'subordinate post'. In the same month he obtained one farthing damages in a libel case against (**Sir**) **John O'Shanassy** who had referred to his 'habitual insolence as a corrupt official' but the court decided that the phrase had no direct personal link. In 1856 he was president of the Melbourne Club and on 15 March he received £1800 as compensation for loss of position as chief commissioner; on 1 May he was reappointed commissioner of crown lands for the Wimmera. In June 1860 his post was abolished; he was granted £1500 in compensation in 1862 and in July he became secretary for railways at a salary of £800. At his own request he was appointed sheriff of Victoria in 1871, and in December 1876 he became chairman of the Tender Board. In January 1877 he was also gazetted acting inspector-general of penal establishments.

On 28 August 1866 at St John's Church, Heidelberg, Wright had married Mary Meek. In 1876 three of his four children died of scarlet fever. On 31 January next year he dined with **George Higinbotham** at Brighton and stayed the night. Next morning he was found dead. An inquest attributed his death to 'coma caused by the pressure of a bony growth upon the brain'. Aged 61, he was buried after an Anglican service in St Kilda cemetery, survived by his wife and a son. The *Argus* commented on his 'strict conscientiousness in the discharge of his duties [and his] frank open manner [which] greatly endeared him to those placed under him'; he was 'greatly esteemed by a very large circle of private friends'.

Select Bibliography

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William Henry Wright (1816-1877), by unknown engraver, 1877

La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, IAN21/02/77/20

Life Summary [\[details\]](#)

Birth

1816
Sandhurst, Berkshire, England

Death

1 February, 1877 (aged ~ 61)
Brighton, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Cultural Heritage

- English

Religious Influence

- Anglican

Occupation

- commissioner of crown lands
- goldfields commissioner
- Member of Upper House
- public servant
- public service head
- surveyor