

To Captain George Ward Cole †  
[from a draft in another's hand]

Clapham House, Lewes, Sussex,  
January 28th, 1869.

My dear Captain Cole,

Last mail will have taken out the sad intelligence of the death of our excellent old friend, Captain Ferguson. This will have been a terrible blow to his children and to his friends in the colony, who may have held reason to expect his early return to his home, with a not unreasonable prospect of ultimate restoration to health and activity. In the course of last October I went up to town with one of my children, mainly with the purpose of finding my way to Pinner, where he and Mrs. Ferguson were staying with an intimate friend. I found him in excellent health and spirits, and enjoying the prospect of a speeding resumption of the service to which he had devoted his best days, and upon the furtherance of which his entire energy was still directed. A week or two later Captain and Mrs. Ferguson went to Dover for change of air, and being still under the impression received from the advisers by whom they had been guided during their residence at a hydropathic establishment at Matlock, felt encouraged to plan almost immediate return to the colony by the Jerusalem early in December. However, certain misgivings in the mind of a medical gentleman, then in England, under whose care Captain Ferguson had at one time placed himself in Williamstown, led them to consider it judicious before departure to take the advice of some surgeon of eminence in London. Accordingly they came up to town at the close of November. The first London practitioners they consulted shook their heads, and advised consultation with Sir Wm. Ferguson. The result was that amputation, without loss of time, was pronounced necessary. The rest is soon told. He received the painful intelligence with calmness and full resignation to God's will, and underwent the operation at King's College Hospital with exemplary firmness and courage on the 28th of November. Perfect success seemingly attended it, and there seemed, humanly speaking, to be every prospect of a prompt cure and early convalescence; everything seemed in his favour. A few days later, however, all was clouded by symptoms of hospital fever (*pyoæmia*). This resisted all control, and finally carried him off on the 27th of December, just one month after the operation. He had lived a Christian life, and his death was the peaceful and resigned death of a Christian. It was a melancholy satisfaction to me to be able to join a few friends in following his remains to their resting place in one of the outlying London cemeteries on the last day of the year. You know Mrs Ferguson well, and will be prepared to hear me say that her whole conduct and demeanour throughout this period of suspense and bitter trial has been worthy of her high character and steadfast principle. Come what will, and happen what may, I have the fullest conviction that neither the widow nor the children will be forsaken, however doubtful and clouded the future may appear, in consequence of the irreparable loss which, they have sustained.

And now, dear Captain Cole, it is possible that you may already have heard all this from other sources, but I have dictated it to you under strong impulse, for I feel assured that there is no member of the community in which you live who will more sincerely deplore the loss of Captain Ferguson on private grounds; at the same time that there is no one who, from long acquaintance with his official character and services, will be in a better position to estimate their real value or the loss which the colony has sustained.

The circumstances in which Captain Ferguson's family are left not only demands the utmost display of sympathy and interest on the part of friends, but may call for decided and prompt action; therefore I cannot rest satisfied without discharging what I consider *my* duty, and seeking to strengthen your hands as far as I may in bringing the character of his long services before the existing colonial authorities. Of his private career previous to his entering the service of the Colonial Government in 1851 nothing need be said.

Captain Ferguson was appointed as the Harbour Master at Geelong in April, 1851 – a few months before the separation of the colony from New South Wales. He there did excellent service in a variety of ways calculated to advance the interests of the port, and to introduce

order, where, from circumstances, but little order had hitherto prevailed. His was the first appointment of this class in that locality. The separation of the colony from New South Wales took place in the month of July following. Shortly after, the late Captain Bunbury resigned the Harbour Mastership of Port Phillip. Captain Ferguson was at once (February, 1852) appointed to succeed him, and from that time performed all duties of Chief Harbour Master of the colony. The previous year (May 1851) the first gold discoveries in New South Wales had taken place, and in the month of August those of our colony followed. At the time of Captain Ferguson's taking charge of the Port of Melbourne their influence had begun to be fully felt, and in no department more seriously than in that of the Harbour Master. This is no place for statistical details, but they must bear me out in reminding you of a few facts connected with our late friend's career. At the time of separation that department comprised only 30 individuals of all ranks, and when he took charge the number was much reduced. There were at that time, according to the returns, no fewer than 54 vessels, registering 26,785 tons, in Hobson's Bay alone. The crews on arrival numbered 1,235 men. Of this number only 463 remained on board, 500 having deserted, and the rest having been discharged by arrangement or pure necessity. For the first six months after Captain Ferguson's assumption of office as Harbour Master the duties of Police Magistrate and Chief of the Water Police were superadded, and how much labour they involved may be surmised from the fact that from 1st of April to the 31st July, 1852, four months only, no less than 236 marine cases were brought before the bench at Williamstown - sometimes as many as 30 in a day. A year later (March 1853) the returns show that the number of vessels in the harbour in Hobson's Bay alone were 91, tonnage 43,754; and passing on to the still later returns of May, 1853, two years after Captain Ferguson's assumption of office, we find from the records that the number of ships in port had increased to 129; tonnage, 63,292; crew on board on arrival, 2872, and at the date of report, 1628; the amount of desertions at that time having, however, proportionally diminished, in consequence of the abatement of the gold fever, caused by the non-success attendant upon the labours of thousands at the goldfields.

The above numbers take no account of the large number of vessels and amount of tonnage lying at the wharves at Melbourne or elsewhere. From these figures alone it may be judged what must have been a struggle in which the Chief Harbour Master was engaged from the very outset to secure order, and answer the innumerable calls on every branch of his department, at the same time that there was for many months an almost complete impossibility of securing subordinate agency, such as boatmen, pilots, and police, at any price. But I may bear witness to the untiring diligence, energy, and self-devotion with which Captain Ferguson grappled with the difficulties of his position, and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles which stood in his way.

Ashore and afloat he was always ready, showing the same directness of purpose, intelligence, and forgetfulness of self. He shunned no responsibility, and turned his hand from no work, whether within or beyond the ordinary scope of his duty, which the hard necessity of the times forced the Government to bring under his notice.

Already in 1852, when the overflowing of our gaol and stockade rendered the adoption of other methods of restraint absolutely necessary, and addition to the existing buildings could not be thought of, it was Captain Ferguson who first suggested the employment of hulks; and it was with his personal assistance and supervision, and under his unflagging energy, that the three first of these - the Success, the President, and the Sacramento - were purchased, fitted up, and made available for the purpose in view, and the rules and regulations for the employment and safety of the men afloat and ashore prescribed and carried out. He carried the same energy into every branch of his department, and his influence was soon apparent. His subordinates of every class became actuated by his spirit. As time moved on, the range of his duties, both ordinary and extraordinary, increased.

In the formation of the quarantine station at the heads, in the management if not the erection of lighthouses, sailing directions, port and wharf regulations, buoys, signal stations,

steam dredging &c., he was the main and most active agent. The whole pilot establishment and regulations, men, and vessels, were under his charge; and when I left the colony in May, 1854, the entire range of ports outside Port Phillip Heads from Point Lonsdale to Portland, as well as that of Geelong had felt the influence of his intelligent supervision and care.

The entire department of Chief Harbour Master, which I have numbered at the period of separation about thirty individuals, then numbered 230.

The character of Captain Ferguson's unbroken service during the fourteen years which have elapsed since I left the colony must be well known to the Government and the people he has served so long and so faithfully. I confine myself to recalling to mind those earlier, and what must have been the hardest and most difficult, period – none can know *how* difficult but those who were in that fierce struggle for the maintenance of order under so many disadvantages; and on this subject I have spoken advisedly and with reason, for I may truly say he worked under my own eye. I had sincere regard for the man, and just pride in the qualities of his heart, head, and hand. Whatever mistakes may have been made by the Government of the colony in those hard and difficult times (and I am quite ready to admit that there were many, especially if the past is to be judged by the light of the present), I never have hesitated in believing that, in appointing Captain Ferguson to the office he has so long filled, it was the right man in the right place. I shall be heartily rejoiced to find that the Government and inhabitants of the colony admit that this has been the case, and to learn that they have not forgotten the strong claims of one who has served them so long and so faithfully, and who, removed by God's providence, so to say, in the maturity of his powers, has left a widow and young family behind him.

I have done, I leave you to make use of this communication, or any portion of it, which you may think judicious and called for. There may be among Ferguson's friends those who may not be sorry to be reminded of *facts*. By-the-bye, I may mention as a proof how completely Captain Ferguson's mind was engrossed by devotion to his public duty, that while in Dover, only ten days before the operation, he took an opportunity to drag himself up into the lantern of the S. Foreland Lighthouse, and made a most careful scrutiny of the whole apparatus and arrangement, with a view of the adoption of any hint for the perfection of those under his charge in the colony. And now, goodbye.

I trust this will find you in good health, and in comparative vigour.

Believe me ever, dear Captain Cole,

Yours very truly,

C. J. La Trobe

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To James Graham †

[November 1869  
Extract]

Since I received your last, I have had Rusden's promised note, with its poetical enclosure. I beg that you would thank him heartily for it, and the kind spirit which inspired both the lines and the letter. I am not insensible to the compliment paid me [about the legacy of Melbourne's parks and reserves], and the recognition of one good service, at least, which I had it in my power to render to the public inhabiting the City of Melbourne, and their children after them. I am jealous that it should not be quite forgotten also that, from the first, I fostered the plan of the Yan Yean Lake, and turned the first sod of the works. Without the advantages thus secured, Melbourne would never be what it is now.