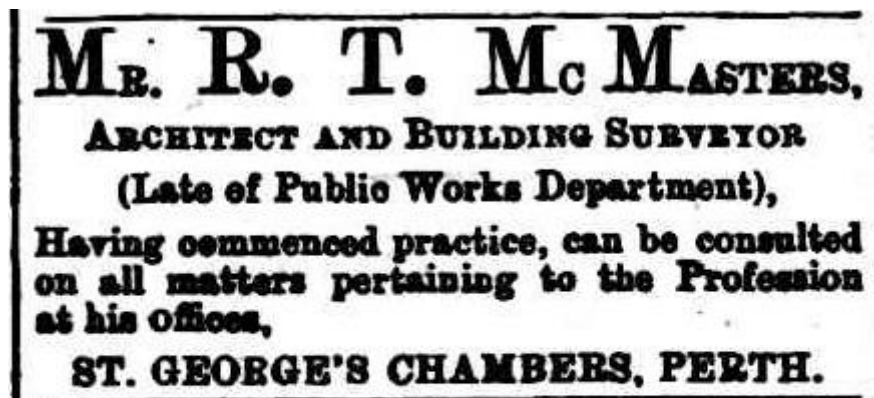


Robert Thompson McMaster (1865-1915)

**– Architect, Pastoralist, Public Official,
War Hero -**

Robert Thompson McMaster was born in Melbourne, Victoria on 29 December 1865¹ his father was Vincent Robert McMaster, also a native of Victoria. No record of Robert McMaster's mother or siblings has been found at present.

Robert attended Scotch College in Melbourne until the age of 16 when he was articled to well-known architect Michael Egan. He was indentured for eight years learning the trade. Due to a crippling economic depression in Melbourne in the early 1890s, Robert was one of a number of young architects to move to Western Australia, knowing there would be work because of that state's gold rush. He joined the Public Works Department for a short while, before opening his own architectural firm around June/July 1892. Tenders for the construction of buildings designed by Robert were being advertised in mid-June 1892 and the announcement of his architectural practice appeared in the *West Australian* on 2 July 1892.



1892 'Classified Advertising', The West Australian (Perth, WA : 1879 - 1954), 2 July, p. 3. , viewed 01 Apr 2020, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3037313>

¹ No birth is registered in the Births Deaths and Marriages Victoria database however. Another source, a contemporary newspaper article stating that Robert may have been born in Scotland, also proves unsupportable at present as Scotland's People, a UK Government agency, does not record a birth for Robert Thompson McMaster either.

Robert designed many residential and commercial properties in and around Perth. His most notable works are:

Commercial

- Central Arcade – from Murray Street to Wellington Street, Perth, c. 1904 (demolished in the 1920s with the creation of Forrest Place).
- United Services Hotel – 43 St George's Terrace, Perth (demolished)
- Ozone Hotel – 1 Adelaide Terrace, Perth, 1898 (demolished)
- Smith's Chambers – 115-117 Barrack Street, Perth
- Broken Hill Hotel – 314 Albany Highway, Victoria Park, built between 1897-1898

Residential

- "Tukurua" – Built in 1896 as the home of the Burt family – 7 Rosendo Street, Cottesloe
- 105 Berwick Street, Victoria Park – McMaster's own residence, built in 1896
- 86 Mackie Street, Victoria Park – Residence of Herbert Devenish, and sometimes known as Forrest Farmhouse, built 1896

Family Life

Robert married Emily Frances Helmsley HOLMAN in 1894. Emily was born in Adelaide, South Australia in 1865, and had lived with her family in England for some years before moving back to Australia and coming to Perth c. 1887.

Together Robert and Emily had six (6) children, one Emily Vernon McMASTER was born in 1896 and died after only seven days. The surviving children were Ray Halliday, Alwyn Robert, Eric Frank, Jessie Lorn and Alice Frances Norma (often known as Norma or Nonna).

1st Mayor of the Municipality of Victoria Park and Public Life

Local government was established in the area we now know as the Town of Victoria Park in 1894 when the Victoria Park Roads Board was established. "Three years after being declared a Roads Board, with an area encompassing 4,198 acres, 350 dwellings and a population approximately 1,197 persons, Victoria Park was deemed to be sufficiently settled to warrant municipality status, under the inaugural



leadership of Robert McMaster.”² The Municipality of Victoria Park was gazetted on 30 April 1897. Robert also held the Mayoral office in 1906-1907, and stood as a candidate for the seat of Canning Park in Western Australian state government elections in 1911. He was not fond of party politics and stood as an independent.

Boer War

Robert Thompson McMaster held a strong interest and participation in the defence of the colonies. Whilst growing up and during his studies in Victoria, he served five years with the rank of Lieutenant in the Victoria Artillery. He also served five years as a Lieutenant in the WA Infantry.

When Britain asked her colonies for help in defeating its enemies in South Africa (Boer War 1899-1902), the call was swiftly answered. A total of six contingents were recruited from Western Australia prior to Federation. Each contingent had around 120-130 men and officers. Captain Robert Thompson McMaster was one of the commissioned officers in charge of the second contingent of 130 men (led by Major H. L. Pilkington). Robert had retired from the profession of architect sometime in 1899.

Robert was given his own spirited send-off by the residents and Mayor of Victoria Park at a complementary social on Wednesday 10 January 1900. The *Western Mail* article of the following Saturday described the event thus:

“At the Town Hall, Victoria Park, on Wednesday, Lieutenant McMaster, a former mayor of the municipality, was tendered a send-off by the residents. The hall was crowded, there being a goodly sprinkling of military people present. The visitors included Messrs. H. J. Saunders, M.L.C., Frank Wilson, B. C. Wood, C. J. Moran, and J. R. A. Conolly, M’s.L.A., J Gardiner and J. J. Holman, and the members of the local council, Majors Campbell and Strickland, and Lieutenants Harris, Inglis, and De Castilla.

The Mayor (Mr. A. G. Russell) presided, the guest being seated on his right. The tables were nicely arranged and the hall decorated with bunting and flags, a fresh appearance being lent by the artistic arrangement of pot plants, etc. A long programme of toasts and vocal music was gone through, being interspersed with refreshments. In proposing the toast of ‘Our Guest,’ the Chairman stated that the complimentary social was tendered to Lieutenant McMaster by the council and residents of the municipality as a mark of their appreciation of his loyalty and patriotism in going to the front. He congratulated Mr. McMaster upon his appointment as first subaltern of the Mounted Infantry. During the speech of the Mayor considerable enthusiasm was manifested, which culminated in much cheering

² Thompson, Susannah 2012, *Beyond Matta Gerup: a history of the Victoria Park, Town of Victoria Park, Victoria Park, Western Australia*, 2013 reprint, p. 28.

when Mr. Russell, on behalf of the assembly, presented Lieut. McMaster with a beautiful pair of field-glasses and a spirit flask, both being suitably inscribed.

On rising to respond, Lieut. McMaster was greeted with tumultuous applause. When he at length secured a hearing he expressed himself as feeling deeply grateful for the reception given him. Not being a feather-bed soldier, he has thought it his duty to volunteer. Speaking with reference to the condition of the men composing the mounted contingent he said that, thanks to the untiring energy of Major Campbell, they were daily showing improvement, and for the class of work required of them, it would be a difficult matter to find a better body of men than those at present drilling at Karrakatta. Whether they came back or not the residents of the colony would find that every man would be a credit to it, and would do his duty. (Applause.)"³ There followed numerous other toasts and speeches and several vocal performances were also rendered before the night was concluded with a collection being taken up for the Absent Minded Beggar Fund.

The second mounted infantry contingent (McMaster included) left Fremantle on the 2 February 1900 on the transport "Surrey". There was much fanfare and patriotic demonstration as the farewelling crowds sang popular tunes of the time to honour the troops.



2nd W.A. Contingent to the Boer War marching through Fremantle, 2 February 1900. Photograph by Dease Studios, Perth. Courtesy of the State Library of Western Australia (025787PD)

³ 1900 'SEND-OFF TO LIEUTENANT McMASTER.', *Western Mail* (Perth, WA : 1885 – 1954), 13 January, p. 23., viewed 31 Mar 2020, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article33176641>.

During the war Robert was present at the Engagements of Diamond Hill and Sand River. He received the King's South African Medal and the Queen's South African Medal with six clasps for his service to the British Empire.⁴



The King's South Africa Medal, shown here with two clasps, one for service in the war in 1901 and one for service in 1902. Courtesy of WP:NFCC#4 (Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45669300>)

Pastoralist and Horse Breeder

Upon his return from the Boer War, and perhaps before, Robert was involved in pastoral activities across the eastern districts and as a breeder of horses of some note. He had established a farm at Merredin and had regular horse sales. He also owned racehorses, one of which, a stallion, was named "Barbarossa". This horse seemed to be quite well known, winning second prize in the open stallion any age competition at the Royal Show in 1907 and in 1909 and was noted in horse circles as a notable sire. During this time Robert still dabbled a little in architecture, as it was between 1905 and 1906 that he designed the Central Arcade (now demolished).

⁴ The clasps referred to were awarded on the Queen's South African Medal for various campaign involvement. More information on the different campaign clasps can be found on the website of a company in Northumberland, England called "North East Medals".
https://www.northeastmedals.co.uk/britishguide/queens_south_africa_medal.htm

WWI Service

Although having been placed on the retired list from the military following his service in the Boer War, Robert applied on the 1 November 1914 for a commission in the Australian Imperial Forces. He was accepted first as a Lieutenant in the 10th Light Horse then later awarded the rank of Hon. Captain.

Robert was so keen to be accepted in the AIF that he adjusted his date of birth by five years so as to be under the age limit for joining. He stated on his enlistment papers that he was born on 29 December 1870 and was aged 43 years and 10 months. Robert embarked for the front from Fremantle on the 19 April 1915.

What happened next in the life of Robert Thompson McMaster, architect, family man, pastoralist, horse breeder and Boer War veteran was to place the title of "hero" to his name. Robert wouldn't have been long on the shores of Gallipoli when he was killed in action at Walkers Ridge on 7 August 1915. His body was never found. His name however is listed on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.

What memorial plaques don't say, as Dr Peter Gifford points out in a 2014 Letter to the Editor of the *Southern Gazette*⁵ that the battle in which Robert took part and was killed was the famous Battle of the Nek. In this battle Robert was amongst seven officers and 73 men from the 10th Light Horse to be killed. These "circumstances [are] portrayed graphically and accurately at the climax of Peter Weir's 1981 film, GALLIPOLI." ⁶

Charles W. Bean, Australia's official war historian writes of the manner in which the men at the Battle of the Nek died "In a hopeless situation after a failure in communications caused a supporting artillery bombardment to end seven minutes early, the men of the Victorian 8th Light Horse regiment had attacked first, only to be mown down by the massed Turkish rifles and machine guns which the communication breakdown had allowed to move back into defensive positions literally only a few metres from the Australian line."

"The 10th went forward to meet death instantly, as the 8th had done, the men running as swiftly and as straight as they could at the Turkish rifles. With that regiment went the flower of the youth of Western Australia, sons of the old pioneering families, youngsters – in some cases two and three from the same home – who had flocked into Perth at the outbreak of war with their own horses and saddles in order to secure enlistment in a mounted regiment of the A.I.F. Men known and popular, the best loved leaders in sport and work in the West, then rushed straight to their death."⁷

⁵ Gifford, Peter Dr 2014, 'Letters to the Editor', *Southern Gazette*, 26 March, p. 5

⁶ Gifford op. cit.

⁷ Bean, C.E.W., *The Official History Of Australia In The War Of 1914-1918: Volume II, The Story Of Anzac: From 4 May, 1915 To The Evacuation*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938, pp. 617-618, 616.

Robert's service record held by the National Archives of Australia contains a file note that is a "copy of proceedings of a Board of Enquiry assembled at Russells Top. [sic] Gallipoli Peninsula, on the 8th day of August, 1915 for the purpose of enquiring into, and reporting on thirty seven (37) Officers, N. C. O's, and men of the 10th Light Horse Regiment, reported 'missing' since the assault on the Turkish trenches on the Nek, Anzac, on the morning of the 7th August, 1915." The evidence of Lieutenant Colonel N. M. Brazier stating "After referring the matter to the 3rd Light Horse Brigade Headquarters [a Victorian brigade], he ordered the 10th Regiment which he commands, to assault in 2 lines the Turkish trenches on the NEK, in an easterly direction from our trenches on Russells Top, although at this time, there was a murderous hail of shrapnel, machine gun and rifle fire from the enemy and felt quite convinced few if any, would return. He has personally seen with a periscope, a great number of dead outside our trenches, and has caused the recovery of all those bodies, which up to the present he considers wise to risk further loss of life for.

"He is of the opinion that all the missing are dead, and further from the reports of the wounded who returned to the lines, and from personal observation with the periscope immediately after the assault, that no single individual of the 10th Regiment reached the Turkish trenches. Subsequent to the assault the enemy were seen deliberately firing on the wounded".⁸

Death

In memoriam for 13 residents from the district, including Robert, a united church service was held at the Victoria Park Town Hall on 24 October 1915. The service had been arranged by the Council and the Mayor, Mr. J. Rushton was the chair. As the *West Australian* reports⁹ "The hall was crowded, and the audience joined with fervour in the singing of the hymns, "Alleluia!", "O Paradise!", "Thy Will be Done," and "On the Resurrection Morn", to the accompaniment of an orchestra, under Mr. J. Buzza. In an interval the Mayor unveiled a photograph in memory of Captain R. T. McMaster who was the first mayor of Victoria Park.

"The Rev. H. Faull, in the course of an address, said they honoured the fallen heroes for their devotion to duty. These valiant men had heard their country's call and had responded nobly. A compelling sense of duty and right was surely the noblest and most divine of the human chords, and it was a comfort to think that the fallen soldiers had been faithful to their conviction of right. Their memory was honoured also because they gave their lives in a noble cause – the principles of freedom and humanity, which were dearer to them than life itself. Truly, that hillside, overlooking the landing place at Gallipoli, was a very dear place to all Australians. He could think

⁸ National Archives of Australia, World War I Service Record of: McMaster Robert Thompson : SERN HON CAPT : POB N/A : POE N/A : NOK W McMaster Emily Frances, Barcode 1956099.

⁹ 1915, 'MEMORIAL FOR THE FALLEN', *West Australian* (Perth, WA : 1879-1954), 25 October, p. 8, <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article26960604>>

of no more apt quotation, for the occasion, than Lord Lytton's words: 'Farewell, fallen soldiers; though this life be o'er there is another. Lord grant that in the life to come, we may meet once more.'¹⁰

Left a widow with five children, Emily was yet to face more tragedy, as their son Alwyn Robert, who also served in the 10th Light Horse, returned from the war in 1919, only to die in a tragic accident in 1922 at the age of 23. Emily would also lose her last remaining son¹¹ Eric Frank McMaster in 1926 aged 21. Fortunately Emily had the company of her two living daughters until they each married. Emily was also a talented musician and well-loved in the community in her own right¹². She was the music teacher at Scotch College, Swanbourne for 22 years and church organist at her local church in Mt Lawley. Emily McMaster died in 1941 at aged 76 years, she had been widowed for 26 years.

Honoured

Robert Thompson McMaster was honoured in 1918 by the renaming of Hereford Street. McMaster Street, Victoria Park as it is now known, intersects with Albany Highway across from the Town's Memorial Gardens which honours all local war heroes. A few short metres away from the gardens stands the stately visage of the Broken Hill Hotel, a testament to a bygone era, and a beloved local landmark, a visual reminder of the creative genius of the architect.

Lest We Forget Robert Thompson McMaster

¹⁰ 1915, 'MEMORIAL FOR THE FALLEN', West Australian (Perth, WA : 1879-1954), 25 October, p. 8, <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article26960604>>

¹¹ Ray Halliday McMaster had died in a tragic horse riding accident in 1912.

¹² 1941 'FUNERAL – THE LATE MRS. E. F. H. McMASTER', West Australian (Perth, WA : 1879-1954), Saturday 17 May 1941, p. 13, < <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article47324863>>

Family Tree

Robert Thompson McMASTER

Born: 29 December 1865, Melbourne, Victoria

Father: Vincent Robert McMASTER

Mother: Unknown

Married: 1894 **Emily Frances Helmsley HOLMAN**, Perth, WA

[Emily was b: 18 April 1865, Adelaide, South Australia; d. 13 May 1941 aged 76, Mount Lawley, WA]

Died: 7 August 1915, Walkers Ridge, Gallipoli, Turkey.

Children:

- Ray Halliday McMASTER, b. 1894; d. 24 February 1912 (horse accident) Merredin, WA
- Emily Vernon McMASTER, b. 1896; d. 1896 (lived seven days)
- Alwyn Robert McMASTER, b. 1899 (also served in the 10th Light Horse in WWI); d. 25 July 1922 (accident)
- Eric Frank McMASTER, b. 1904; d. 22 February 1926 (accident)
- Jessie Lorn McMASTER, b. 1906; m. 1932 Maurice Dudley EASTON
- Alice Frances Norma McMASTER, b. ???; m. 1928 Bertram G. STUBBS

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