

FAITH OF A PIONEER

By Ken McNaughton

The Presbyterian Church played an important role in the development and character of early Melbourne, where white settlement started in 1835. The church had a powerful ally in my great great grandfather, John Ross McNaughton, who also played an important part in building the city, 1839-1885.



Figure 1. Looking southeast across Melbourne from the northeast corner of William and Lonsdale Streets, December 1869.

SCOTLAND

Before John Ross McNaughton migrated to Australia, he obtained two references from Kirkintilloch dated 15 February 1838:

“These certify that the bearer John McNaughton is connected with the United Associated Congregation here though not yet in full communion & that so far as is known to us he is of a blameless character.”

And. Marshall, Minister

“The bearer John McNaughton has resided for about ten years in Kirkintilloch & has behaved himself in a respectable manner so far as is known to us.”

Adam Forman, Minister
John Horn, Elder

Dr. Andrew Marshall was minister of the United Secession Chapel on Back Causeway. An Associate Synod Secession Church had been set up in 1766 (it later became a Free Church after breaking away from the Church of Scotland in 1843). Marshall was a cantankerous, controversial, conservative man and does not appear to have known the 24-year-old John Ross McNaughton very well. John planned to sail from Greenock on the *William Rodger* on 17 May with 21-year-old Agnes (née Stirling) and his one-year-old daughter Jane. He needed two references to qualify for the Government Bounty Scheme. Jane’s birth certificate states she was born in Kirkintilloch. The death certificate for Agnes says she was married in Glasgow, but we have not been able to find a marriage certificate. John was not taking communion at the Secession Church and there is no mention in the reference about his wife or child being part of the congregation.

Adam Forman was minister from 1811 to 1845 of the Auld Kirk, also known as the Parish Church of Kirkintilloch or St. Mary’s Church. In 1837, when he perambulated on Cowgate followed by his faithful dog, strollers would rush out of his sight, for fear of reprimand. The

population of Kirkintilloch was about 6,800 in 1838, and in 1845 there were 700 communicants at the Auld Kirk. Forman's reference suggests John had been living there for ten years, but neither he nor the Elder, John Horn, seemed to know John very well. But it was a good idea to get a reference from the Church of Scotland, even if he didn't attend its services. John had a wife



Figure 2. Looking south over Lonsdale Street, the river Yarra flows left to right in the background, December 1969.

and young child to think about, had to earn a living, and was contemplating a voyage half way around the world that would have them on the high seas for five months [1]. They would be menaced by pirates, and twenty percent of the passengers would die of typhoid fever. The things that were going to happen to him would be enough to turn a man to religion.

MELBOURNE

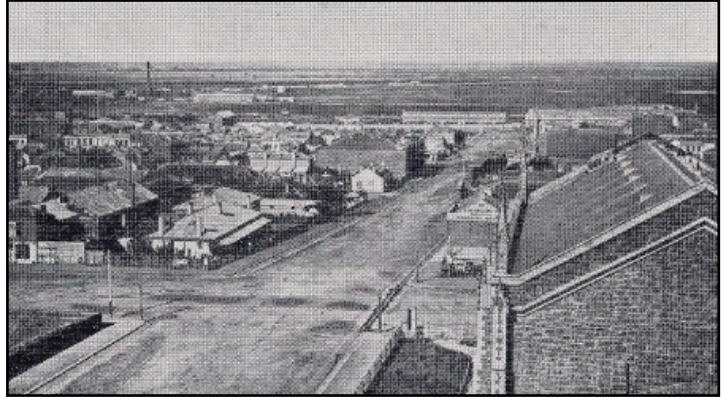
John and his little family arrived at Port Phillip on 3 January 1839, about three years after the first white settlers. On 12 January he started work with Thomas Watt, who operated the first punt across the River Yarra, before there was a bridge. Many years later, Rev. Macdonald said that John "first wrought at Heidelberg, then an agricultural settlement, supposed to be far in the bush, but he soon went further into the interior, and engaged in the service of Mr. (afterwards Sir Wm.) Mitchell, who was then making his place at Barfold, on the Campaspe. Mr. M'Naughton invested in working-horses. He was his own carter, and by the time that gold was discovered, in 1851, he had a good team, and was thus in circumstances to make money. Unlike many others, who threw away their all on a venture, this careful Scotchman carted to the goldfields, and at a time when teamsters received £1 per ton per mile in taking goods to Bendigo, his means steadily increased" [2]. When some of their children were baptized in 1851, John described himself as "Waterman," which may have meant he delivered water to the settlers. When his son Peter was born on 12 September 1857, John described himself as a carter.

John was busy working, and he and his wife were busy having children—Christina (or Christian) on 20 February 1840, John (my great grandfather) on 28 January 1842, James 30 April 1844, Alexander 13 May 1846, Charles 1848 and Agnes on 28 Mar 1850. The Great Victorian Gold Rush started in 1851 and the McNaughtons celebrated by having five of the children baptized on 22 Jun 1851 by the Rev. Irving Hetherington at Scots Church. Charles had apparently died and Jane may have been baptized in Scotland. Scots, the first purpose-built Presbyterian Church in Melbourne, was opened on the corner of Collins and Russell Streets on 3 October 1841. When the two-acre site was originally allocated by government grant the Church elders objected that it was "too far out of town."

John McNaughton made money at the carting business and bought land in Lonsdale Street where he lived at No. 138 between 1851 and 1873. The McNaughtons had three more children—Peter

was born on 13 September 1857 and Colin on 13 January 1860; William was born in 1852 but died in 1853.

Figure 3. Looking west, with the church roof at right, Lonsdale Street runs toward Spencer Street, December 1869.



WEST MELBOURNE PRESBYTERIAN

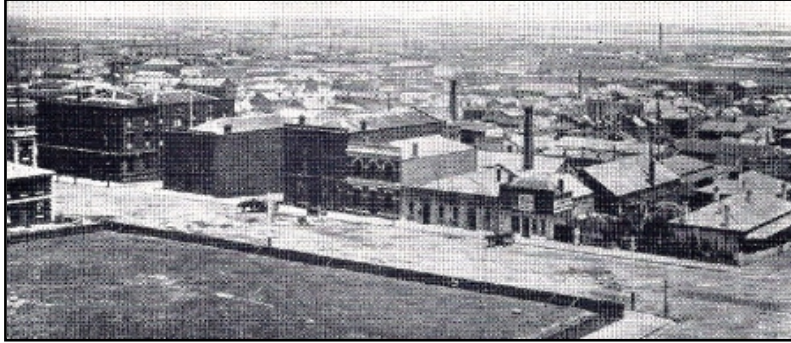
J. Stanley Martin wrote in 1967 about the birth of the church that became so important to John McNaughton [3, 4]. In the 1860s, there was a flush of success in Melbourne, after the giddy Gold Rush.

At this time West Melbourne became the fashionable district where many men of rising fortunes set up their residences. Numerous public buildings of importance were erected in the vicinity of William and Lonsdale Streets. Here stood the Treasury, the Government Printing Office, the Police Barracks, the Office of the Chief Commissioner of Police and the administrative offices, called Latrobe House. Around these imposing buildings developed a very fashionable district, a West End as in London and Edinburgh. Among the businessmen of early West Melbourne were many Scots and Irish Presbyterians. Alexander Stevenson, the coach builder under vice-regal patronage, James Paterson, already a leading coal and shipping merchant, Samuel Amess, an alderman and building contractor, and John McLeod, a potato merchant, were among those who sought the establishment of a Presbyterian church in the district where they had built their homes. They had no church connected with the Presbyterian Church of Victoria in the area bounded by Swanston Street and Spencer Street on the one side and between Latrobe Street and the Yarra on the other.

In 1864 a group of fourteen men met with the Rev. D. Macdonald of Emerald Hill (which became South Melbourne in 1883) about setting up a Presbyterian parish in West Melbourne. A weekly meeting began and John became very active. In 1885 Rev. Macdonald recalled:

John M'Naughton was early known as a "West Melbourne" man. Whenever there was a movement in political or municipal affairs John was sure to be deep in consultation on the subject. He would not, however, have been the good Scotchman that he was, unless he also had taken an interest in church affairs. He had early joined the Scots' Church, under the ministry of the Rev. Mr. Hetherington; but the Scots' Church was not in West Melbourne, and he watched for his opportunity to start a Presbyterian cause in his own special field ... Mr. M'Naughton ... had then the leisure and the will to push this movement to practical results. It may be said that he knew every resident in West Melbourne who had any standing in the district, and having now means and time on his hands, he went with all his soul to accomplish the object on which he had long set his heart. He never, of course, neglected his own private affairs, but his true work henceforth was the institution of a congregation of his own denomination in his own locality, and the building of a church worthy of the city of Melbourne.

Figure 4. Looking southwest from the church site across Lonsdale Street, the river again in the background, December 1869.



John was now 50, and perhaps able to draw income from his property investments. Movement on the church was swift. On 3 January 1865, a deputation of six came before the Presbytery and a committee was set up, headed by Rev. Macdonald. On 2 February there was a public meeting nearby at 217 King Street, with

eighty residents, about building a church. Two hundred and sixteen agreed to rent pews, a popular source of income for a church at that time. On 23 March a meeting of interested parties agreed to form a congregation and call a minister. Two-hundred-and-twenty-five signed a call for Dr. Andrew Robertson.

Andrew Robertson was born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1818, and was affiliated with the United Secession Church. In 1847 the United Secession joined with another secessionist group to form the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland. It was this church to which the Victorian church looked in the 1850's to supply ministers. In 1862 Robertson came to Castlemaine, Victoria, and made a profound impression. The newly formed congregation at West Melbourne was anxious to acquire his services and a group of commissioners went to Castlemaine. This group included John McNaughton, D. Macdonald, James Paterson and Alexander Stevenson.

The site for a Presbyterian Church had been set aside in the first land sale of 1837, on the northeast corner, with a 200-foot frontage on Lonsdale street and 175 feet on William Street (Figs.1-4). Rev. Macdonald referred to John McNaughton and J. M. Grant, president of the Department of Lands and Survey: "There were difficulties in procuring a site, but the removal of the Government offices and Parliament House to the other end of the city, left some land available and Mr. M'Naughton did not let the grass grow under his feet until the present noble site was obtained through pressure brought to bear on Mr. J. M. Grant, who was then King in the Lands Department, and was not unwilling to befriend any Presbyterian cause."

On 9 June the committee decided to build a temporary wooden church to hold 500-600 people, to be ready in two weeks to induct Rev Andrew Robertson (Fig. 5). Half the sum required was collected from the committee members. On 29 June Robertson was inducted and the church could not hold the crowd. Three hundred of the 500 sittings had been let. Regular services started on 2 July. But not everyone was happy. In December, at the General Assembly, the Rev. Irving Hetherington, minister at Scots' Church, raised the legality of Robertson's settlement. Church law required that the call for a minister should be given from the pulpit to the congregation. This had been overlooked, because at the time there was no pulpit in West Melbourne. The General Assembly upheld the appeal, but nevertheless confirmed Robertson.

Figure 5. Rev. Andrew Robertson, first minister at the West Melbourne Presbyterian Church.



Martin continues:

Before long the church drew numerous affluent citizens of Melbourne to its services. The carriages of the fashionable would be lined up in Lonsdale and William Streets at the time of worship. But this had little influence on the fiery and democratic Andrew Robertson who spoke at the Assembly on one occasion of the rich who drive up conspicuously in their coaches and send their coachmen away, thus depriving them of the opportunity of attending divine service.

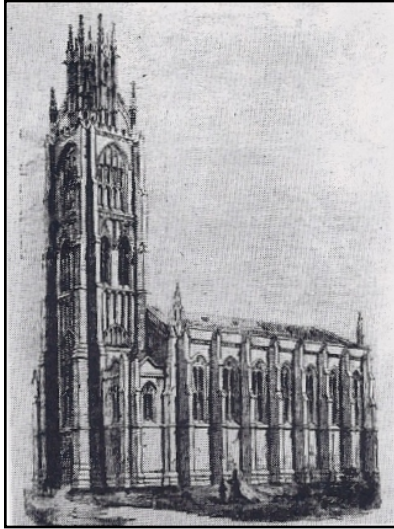
Soon the flourishing congregation at West Melbourne found the temporary structure inadequate to accommodate the congregation. So the new church had to be built sooner than had been expected. The committee commissioned the architects, Messrs. Smith and Watts, of Bank Place, to design the new church. They drew up plans for a stately church in the style of the Gothic revival which delighted the committee (Fig. 6). The whole building was estimated to cost at least £12,000, but the congregation decided to erect the building in two stages. At first the main part would be built and at a later date the tower and vestries (Fig. 7).

The foundation stone of the permanent church was laid on 2 July 1866 and the first stage of the new building was declared open for letting pews ten months later, on 8 April 1867. The first service was on 28 April. Martin describes the church:

The perpendicular Gothic church was built of rough dressed bluestone with free stone quoins and dressings. The interior was 84 feet long and 54 feet wide, and the height was 45 feet. The pews were arranged in an amphitheatre form rising to a height of 10 feet at the back. They were curved in shape, all of the curves being from one centre line. The seats were so arranged to make two aisles converging towards the pulpit in the form of the letter V. Thus the front could be seen from all parts of the building. A flight of stairs led from both outdoor entrances, one at each extremity of the western wall. The roof was of an open timbered construction, supported by light and graceful timbers, stained and varnished. The walls were stuccoed within and set off with handsome mouldings ... There were then 14 large and beautifully stained glass windows (11 of which are still at Box Hill). The magnificently carved reredos [ornamental wood or stone screens], pulpit and pews were also much admired.

Rev. Macdonald recalled John's role:

I will not dwell on the first effort made to erect a temporary church—the wooden structure still in existence—nor the still greater effort made to erect the pile in which we are now met [referring to the new building], more than to say that I doubt whether the one or the other would have been built but for Mr. M'Naughton's efforts—not that money



was wanting, but that such an agent was needed who could press the movement to a consummation. The hard work that he undertook was to collect subscriptions. This, as everyone knows, is work which needs stout qualities. Mr. M'Naughton, though a canny Scotchman, was one of the first—after his efforts to get subscriptions were exhausted—to give his own name, with others, to a guarantee for a large overdraft at a bank, on personal security, for means to finish the body of the church; and thus the West Melbourne church was erected, as we now see. Meanwhile Mr. M'Naughton was working the congregation. He had all the sittings (600) in the temporary church let by the time it was finished.

Figure 6. Gothic vision of the architects for the West Melbourne Presbyterian Church.

John was feeling unwell at the end of 1868 and went to Launceston for a month. His first daughter, Jane, had been married on 10 March 1858 to Hugh Charles Hughes, a gold miner, by Rev. Hetherington. Hughes was killed by a fall of coal in a mine in Newcastle on 21 August 1862. Jane remarried, to John Thomas in Ballarat on 24 December 1869. John's son John married Catherine Grant Brown on 3 April 1872 and they had their first child, John, on 16 May 1873. In 1874, John, who was now 60, was still not feeling well. He gathered together five references, including two from Thomas McPherson, who was Mayor 1870/71, plus these two:

The Manse, Emerald (Hill), Melbourne, 29th January 1874

I have much pleasure in giving a Certificate (sic) of Character to Mr. John McNaughton. I have been intimately acquainted with Mr. McNaughton for several years. His character stands very high among his friends here & I can testify to the intense interest which he takes in the things of the Gospel. He is at present returning to Europe partly for the benefit of his own health and partly for the education of one of his boys [Colin] and I commend him to the good fellowship & Christian sympathy of the those whom he may meet in the Home Country. Mr. McNaughton has enough of means to meet his necessities but as he will now be a stranger in his native land I venture to give him this testimonial in case it may be of use to him.

D. MacDonald D.D.

West Melbourne Presbyterian Manse, 4th February 1874

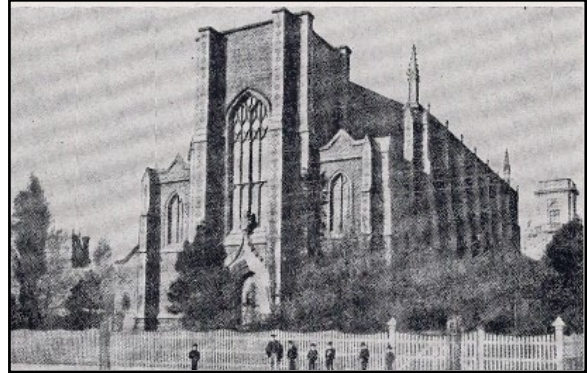
The bearer Mr. John McNaughton, well known as a citizen of Melbourne, has been a member, Manager & Trustee of my congregation for the last 8 years and is now about to leave for Scotland chiefly for the sake of his health. I can testify to the activity he has displayed in all matters connected with my congregation, and the general interests of West Melbourne. No one has been a better a friend to me than Mr. McNaughton and there are few for whom I have a higher regard. He leaves to the great regret of all who know him, and I am sure that he will prove to be, wherever he may take up his residence, a valuable acquisition to the place. Any who may have known me in Scotland, will be conferring a favour upon me, by shewing him whatever kindness they may have it in their power to manifest. I trust that in his advancing years he will reap the benefits of a now pretty long life of industry of usefulness and of success. With every kind wish for him &

all connected with him. I have great pleasure in writing this note for him to use as he may deem proper.

Andrew Robertson, Minister

Figure 7. The committee in West Melbourne decided to build the first stage without the tower and vestries.

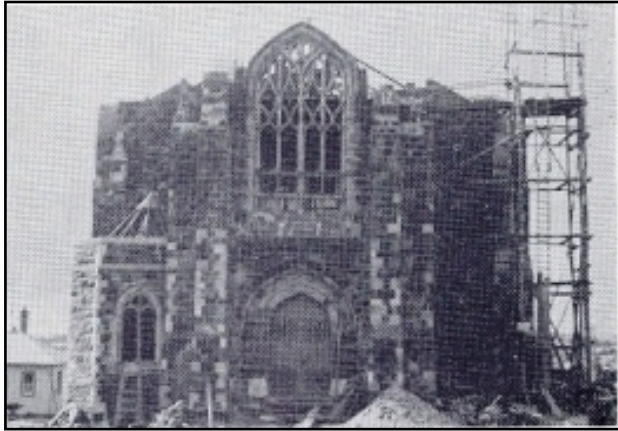
John and Agnes sailed on the *s.s. Great Britain* on 6 February, a journey that would have taken 100 days via Cape Horn [5]. The same month, unbeknownst to them, their eldest son John lost his first child, Little Johnnie. In July and August, John did a lot of traveling in Scotland, England and Ireland, some of it with his son Colin, who was to start high school and then medical school in Edinburgh. By early September John had taken seats at the Free Church of Govan, a suburb of Glasgow. On 23 September he was writing back to his children, John and Agnes, in Melbourne. He had only just learned about the death of Little Johnnie, but also about the sudden and tragic death of his daughter Christian at Sandhurst (now Bendigo).



On 18 November he wrote to his son John: “I am also suffering very much on account of the news of your Last letter Giving me the account of the death of your son and the very awfull and Suden Death of your sister Christian But it is the will of God that these Deaths should be sent to us as warning not to set our hearts too much on this Life as we Do not know who [sic] soon the Call may come to ourselves and we have Great need to Prepare ourselves for it.” Physically he was not feeling well and may have been having paranoid delusions that he was being persecuted by detectives from Melbourne, following a complaint made by his wife [6].

The same pious attitude seems to have been passed to his 30-year-old son John, who, two years earlier, on 13 January 1872, chose to give Catherine Grant Brown a Bible on her 24th birthday with this inscription: *I trust you, my dear “Catherine” may never cease to venerate these sacred writings as the grand repository of moral and religious Truths; that you may ever look upon them with profound reverence; and never indulge yourself in any speculations of thought which may incline you to depart from that sacred standard of religious knowledge which is contained in this Book of Books; but that it may throughout life, be “a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path.” Such is the heart felt wish of Yours Sincerely John McNaughton, Melbourne.* John and Catherine were married two and a half weeks later.

On 18 November, 1874, the same day that John Ross McNaughton wrote from Scotland, there was drama 12,000 miles away in Melbourne with the Presbyterians. At the General Assembly, the Rev. Dr. Cairns censured Rev. Andrew Robertson, who had published in *The Argus* on 9 July a letter critical of the Home Mission Committee. Cairns was Victoria Presbyterianism’s acknowledged spokesman, and few men contributed more to the “Melbourne Sunday.” Robertson walked out of the General Assembly, was suspended, and Rev. Irving Hetherington was appointed moderator of the West Melbourne parish. Andrew Robertson died on 38 January 1875, without clearing his name.



On 5 February, John Ross McNaughton, while still in Scotland taking water cures for rheumatism, lost another daughter, Agnes, who died in Melbourne of tuberculosis [7]. John, his wife and Colin sailed steerage on the *Durham* from London on 21 January 1876. Colin had apparently been unable to continue with school in Edinburgh and died of tuberculosis in Melbourne 9 March 1878.

Figure 8. The church gets rebuilt in Whitehorse Road, Box Hill, 1935.

The district of West Melbourne, which in the 1850s and 1860s attracted the nouveaux riches, was gradually becoming commercialized. Many of the prominent businessmen moved across the Yarra to the newer suburbs of Toorak, Hawthorn and Kew. In many ways the West Melbourne Presbyterian Church reached its peak by 1890. Although the factors leading to the later decline were already present, they lay below the surface. The services were well attended and many of Melbourne's elite were found worshipping there each Sunday. By 1884, only two men of the original Session remained—John McNaughton and John McLeod—and both died the next year. John died on 18 July 1885. On July 21st his funeral was in the West Melbourne Presbyterian Church that he loved.

The Rev. D. Macdonald concluded his obituary:

This accomplished the Christian work on which Mr. M'Naughton first set his heart, but, unlike many others in similar circumstances, he never tired of the good work. He was a trustee and a member of the Board of Management of the congregation till his death, and whoever else neglected the temporal affairs of the congregation, not so Mr. M'Naughton, who counted every shilling of its revenue. I add that he was a regular worshipper, and always in his pew on the Lord's Day. Though in advanced years, he was twice at church on the last Sabbath of his life. In later years he was an elder, and sedulously attended to the duties of his sacred office. He was, in short, a devoted Christian—he loved his Bible and his church, and now, at the close of his useful life, devout men will carry him today to his burial. May the Lord raise up such men in all the congregations of our church!

DEATH OF A CHURCH

The industrialization of the West Melbourne area increased in the 1890s. More and more homes gave place to factories and tenement houses, leaving the church an island in the sea of industry and commerce. The West Melbourne Session Report of 1890 alluded to the financial collapse of some members. The ceasing of the flow of British capital in 1891 and the drastic fall in wool prices overseas in 1892 led to further insolvencies. Then the land speculation bubble burst, leading to the collapse of companies and banks in 1893. The carriages and horse-drawn equipages disappeared on Sunday mornings, leaving the church to depend on the ever-shrinking remnant of worshippers within walking distance. The annual income of seat rents and ordinary collections dropped from £630 in 1888 to £416 in 1893 and to £270 in 1896. For the next thirty years the activities of the West Melbourne congregation reflected the declining population of the area.

One of the few bright spots was in 1912 when the church housed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and the Rev. John Flynn presented his report on the desperate need of the inland for the spiritual and social services of the church. On 1 October, the machinery was set up that led to the Australian Inland Mission and the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the world's first air ambulance.

In November 1934 the Assembly agreed to give the church, with fittings and organ, to the Box Hill congregation. The final service was held on the 3rd February, 1935, at 3 p.m. The day was fine and sunny and the church was crammed to capacity, with worshippers even sitting on the floor. It was estimated that nearly 1,000 were present. The final tolling of the bell in the tower was followed by the benediction. Many of those present lingered in the old church, unwilling to leave. But the church that had died in the midst of the warehouses and factories was to rise again.

RESURRECTION

In June 1934 Messrs. J. F. D. Scarborough and Hugh Craig were appointed architects for a new church at Box Hill. The West Melbourne scheme appealed to them more than the construction of a new building. On the 7th November, 1934, the congregation met to consider a new church costing £5,850, or the re-erection of the West Melbourne church, which would cost £6,500, with organ. The congregation unanimously accepted the West Melbourne project. The removal and re-erection of the West Melbourne church involved immense planning. *The Herald* wrote "the task will be the most difficult ever attempted in Australia" (17 Nov 1934). The successful contractor was Lodge Brothers, a leading Melbourne firm, which had to its credit the building of the Shrine of Remembrance and later, the spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The final service at West Melbourne was conducted on 3 February 1935. A few days later the contractor was busily engaged in demolishing the old bluestone church. The corner stones, the mullions for the windows and the string courses were numbered and classified but this was not necessary for the general stones. The foundation stone was laid at Box Hill on Saturday, 27th April, 1935.

Figure 9. The church was re-opened in Box Hill and dedicated on 14 December 1935.

The building went ahead (Fig. 8) and by November was nearing completion. The West Melbourne church was reduced ten feet in length, seven feet in width and twelve feet in height to cut costs. The floor no longer sloped towards the front and the organ was moved from the rear gallery to the side, thus revealing the beautiful Apostles' windows. *The Age* reported: "In the church at Box Hill the Apostles' window, which is valued at £1,500, has been placed in the lower



portion of the tower, the spiral stone staircase, regarded as the finest example of its kind in Australia, has been re-erected, and the original hand-carved cedar pulpit, reredos, pews and choir stalls have been re-installed. The organ from the old church, built by George Fincham & Sons in 1883, will again fill the historic walls with its mellow tones, and the old bell will summon the congregation. Even the original key will be used to open the old Gothic doors at the official re-

opening.” This took place on Saturday, the 14th December, 1935 (Fig. 9).

There is not much in Melbourne to commemorate the memory of John Ross McNaughton. There are documents in the historical records [8] and he has hundreds of descendants. A book about him was published in 2010 [9] and there is a family tombstone in the Melbourne General Cemetery. I like to think that part of him remains in the old bluestones at Box Hill.

NOTES

Photographs 1-4 were taken by John Noone, photographer to the Government of Victoria, from the roof of the West Melbourne Presbyterian Church in December 1869, two-and-a-half years after the first stage of the new building was declared open. Figs. 1-4 and 5-9 have been reproduced from Ref. 3, and Fig. 5 is reproduced from Ref. 4. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; kjmcn@comcast.net (28 May 2010).

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