

# Fergusson, Sir James (1832–1907)

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Sir James Fergusson (1832-1907), governor, was born on 14 March 1832 in Edinburgh, the eldest son of Sir Charles Dalrymple Fergusson, fifth baronet of Kilkerran in Ayrshire, and his wife Helen, daughter of David Boyle. Fergusson went to Rugby, succeeded to the baronetcy in 1849 and next year entered University College, Oxford. He left without a degree, entered the Grenadier Guards and served in the Crimean war where he was wounded in November 1854. Elected as a Conservative for Ayrshire he entered the House of Commons in May 1855. He retired from the army on 9 August 1859. In 1857 he lost his seat but held it again in 1859-68. He was under-secretary for India in 1866-67 and for the Home Office in 1867-68. He succeeded [Sir Dominick Daly](#) as governor of South Australia and in the *Rangatira* arrived at Adelaide on 15 February 1869. The [Duke of Edinburgh](#) was present next day when Fergusson was sworn in.

South Australia was then in severe depression. A run of bad seasons had ruined harvests, copper and wool prices were low, unemployment was high and many people were migrating to Victoria and New South Wales. As a remedy the government tried to implement [Henry Strangways](#)'s reforms for selling waste lands on easy terms to small settlers but much amendment of the 1868 Act was needed. In the Northern Territory problems of land and settlement were also a costly burden. Disputation in parliament was continuous and sometimes bitter, ministries were short and sometimes stillborn and dissolutions of parliament were too frequent to please the press and some members of parliament. The first crisis was created by dissatisfaction with the budget proposed by Strangways's government. In January 1870 he asked Fergusson to dissolve parliament and despite protests from parliament and press the governor gave his assent. When the new parliament met on 27 May Strangways resigned and [John Hart](#) formed a government. On his resignation in November 1871 [\(Sir\) Henry Ayers](#) and [\(Sir\) Arthur Blyth](#) failed to form ministries and Fergusson again agreed to dissolve parliament. Blyth resigned when parliament met in January 1872 and Ayers then formed a ministry. The dissolutions granted to Strangways and Blyth were described by the *South Australian Register* as the 'gravest errors' of Fergusson's administration. The governor was accused of mistaking the passing attitudes of private members as permanent disorganization and of not realizing that in colonial parliaments party formations changed with every issue; Fergusson had 'honestly striven to act for the best' but he suffered gravely from inexperience of colonial institutions. The governor met this adverse criticism calmly and with dignity.

By June 1871 the colony's economy had improved, the 1870-71 wheat harvest was a record and high prices for wool and copper stimulated trade. Fergusson's interest in the colony's economic progress was active, practical but never domineering. On his way to South Australia he had taken steps to initiate colonial trade with India, particularly in remounts for the Indian army. He visited many agricultural shows in country centres and his speeches, which usually advocated the importance of independence, were designed both to encourage the settlers and promote greater production. Church, charitable and educational institutions could rely on his interest and support. His more personal acts included gifts of books to the construction parties on the overland telegraph line and the loan of his yacht to clergymen visiting outlying coastal missions. He took a close interest in the affairs of the Ebenezer Mission School and encouraged moves towards opening an institution for the blind, deaf and dumb, both for children and for adults. In 1872 Fergusson gave his warm support to the formation of a University Association to promote the establishment of a university. The object of the association, which was greatly aided by a most generous act of self-denial by the Presbyterian, Baptist and Congregational Churches, was achieved with the passing in 1874 of the Act which established the University of Adelaide.

Probably Fergusson's greatest achievement as governor was his part in securing the route of the overland telegraph line through the Northern Territory to Port Augusta. He encouraged the South Australian government in its decision to undertake the land route which required landing the submarine cable at Port Darwin rather than Burketown in Queensland, and then risked Colonial Office disapproval by cabling instructions direct to the South Australian agent-general in London in order to secure the British Australian

Telegraph Co.'s contract. He watched the progress of the enterprise closely and consistently defended the colony against charges of acting selfishly to obtain the contract. Fergusson was prominent in the celebrations which greeted [Charles Todd](#)'s return to Adelaide in November 1872 and his deep personal interest in the project was generously acknowledged.

Less generous were criticisms of Fergusson's apparent aloofness from the community. His social functions at Government House were not lavish and were bitterly attacked by men such as [Lavington Glyde](#). In answer to Glyde's charges Fergusson wrote that it was his duty 'to guarantee to those who come on my invitation to Government House that they shall only meet there persons of respectable character'. His hospitality was also curtailed by his wife's ill health, her confinement in April 1871 and her death in October. Government House levee lists also helped to revive a dispute over precedence, by which the governor gave place to Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops as prescribed in an earlier directive from the [Duke of Newcastle](#) to Governor [Sir Richard MacDonnell](#). In September 1872 the problem was solved when the Queen assured the colonists that in future no bishop or minister of any religious persuasion should be allowed precedence in the colony.

In November 1872 Fergusson was appointed governor of New Zealand and left Adelaide on 6 December for a short visit to England. In 1875, hoping to return to politics, he resigned his post in New Zealand and was made K.C.M.G. In England he tried in vain to re-enter parliament in 1876 and 1878 and in March 1880 accepted the governorship of Bombay. In February 1885 he was made G.C.S.I., and in March returned to England. In 1885-1906 he represented Manchester, serving as under-secretary in the Foreign Office in 1886-91 and postmaster-general in 1891-92. In 1893 with [\(Sir\) John Henniker Heaton](#), [James Hogan](#) and others he formed an Australian party in the House of Commons. Fergusson was a director of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co., the National Telephone Co. and similar enterprises. In 1907 he attended the conference of the British Cotton Growing Association at Jamaica, where on 14 January in a violent earthquake Fergusson was killed while walking in the street near his hotel. He was buried in a churchyard near Kingston.

On 9 August 1859 Fergusson married Edith Christian, daughter of James Andrew Ramsay, marquis of Dalhousie; she died aged 32 at Adelaide on 28 October 1871, leaving two sons and two daughters. On 11 March 1873 in New Zealand he married Olive, daughter of John Henry Richman of Warnbunga, South Australia; she died of cholera at Bombay on 8 January 1882, leaving one son. On 5 April 1893 he married Isabella Elisabeth, widow of Charles Hugh Hoare and daughter of Thomas Twysden; she survived him without issue.

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