

# Mary McConnel

Littleton Groom MHR  
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## QUEENSLANDER STORIES in Eternity

Two Queenslanders are the subjects of modules recently installed in the Eternity gallery – Mary McConnel ('Loneliness') and Sir Littleton Groom ('Devotion'). Both were honoured figures in their home state. Sir Littleton Groom also achieved distinction as a federal politician, minister and first Speaker of the House of Representatives when federal parliament moved to Canberra in 1927.

**Mary McConnel**, who inspired the establishment of Brisbane Children's Hospital, wrote an account of her life as an immigrant from Scotland in the mid-1840s, *Memories of days long gone by. By the wife of an Australian pioneer* (1908). Her module in 'Loneliness' shows how she experienced homesickness and isolation in her new home in Australia, in common with many thousands of immigrants over the last two centuries. It also demonstrates how she acted to improve the lot of others who had made the same journey.

In 1847 Mary McLeod met a young man who had recently returned to Scotland 'after several years pioneering in Australia' – David C McConnel. They were married in April 1848 and, as Mary's parents had 'strongly objected to me going out to that far away land', David McConnel organised for his property in the Moreton Bay District of NSW to be managed in his absence. A few months later this arrangement broke down, and David McConnel had to return. Mary gave him credit for allowing her to choose to go with him or to stay. A deeply religious woman, Mary prayed for guidance and, despite parental opposition, went with her husband to Australia.

Many decades later, Mary still found it painful to recall the parting from her 'beloved Scotland and beloved people'. Her module in *Eternity* evokes this pain, and her initial poor impression of Moreton Bay when the *Chasely*, the immigrant ship on which the McConnells had journeyed to Australia, docked in Brisbane on 1 May 1849: 'What a dreary waste of water the bay looked ... It seemed really to me as if we had come to the end of the known world, and no other had dawned upon us.'

Mary and her husband then travelled to his property, Cressbrook. There she experienced real isolation, cut off

from the company of most women, especially those of her own social class:

*All had been done in and around the house to make it a home for gentlefolk... We took our meals in the common dining room... Master and man shared alike... I know that I often sat down with 14 men, most of them travellers arriving at sundown, which there is no later than 7 o'clock. Cressbrook was on the main road. We often had very pleasant people, but all men.*

Mary could 'scarcely bear' her joy when in 1852 her youngest brother 'unexpectedly arrived from Scotland'. But her homesickness persisted: 'I had begun to feel contented and happy in my far-away home. This far-away-ness caused the one heartache in my otherwise happy life.'

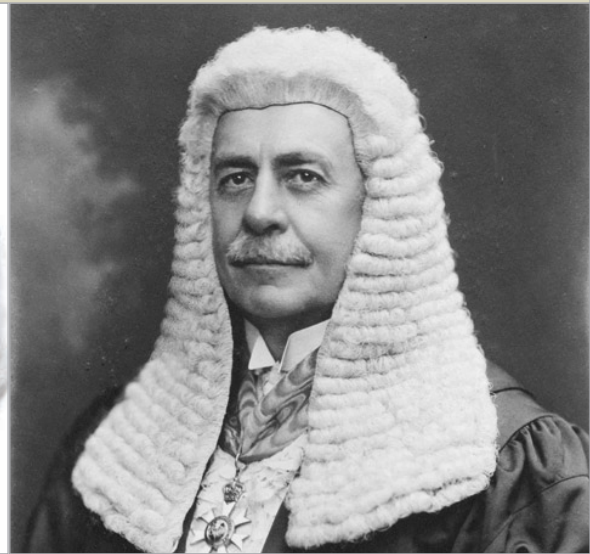
Disaster struck when a fistula in Mary's leg turned gangrenous, and death or permanent disablement was only averted by radical treatment by a German doctor. While she was recovering, her baby son died in her arms, as skilled infant medical care was not available. Mary tried with great stoicism to overcome her grief, but David McConnel realised that she would be better off back in Scotland, and, with no murmur of complaint, sold up and shipped his family out in January 1854.

In 1862 the family returned to what was now Queensland (separated from NSW in 1859). They discovered 'a great change for the better in things generally, still all was in a very crude state'. Nevertheless, there were 'more people and more stir'. Many of these were immigrants from the British Isles. Mary, with her own experience of infant mortality, empathised with these people when their children suffered accidents and sickness, and was appalled at the lack of facilities for treatment. She decided to do something about it: 'I thought it was time to have a children's hospital and resolved that with God's help there should be one, in Brisbane.' Mary McConnel's advocacy resulted in Brisbane Children's Hospital opening on 11 March 1878. She died on 4 January 1910, aged 80.

**Littleton Ernest Groom** was born at Toowoomba on 22 April 1897. His father, William Henry Groom, was the first Member of the House of Representatives for the Darling Downs, and a member of the first federal parliament, but died on 8 August 1901.



*David and Mary McConnell*  
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*Sir Littleton Groom, Speaker of the House of Representatives*  
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Littleton Groom studied law at Ormond College, University of Melbourne. On 4 July 1894 he married Jessie Bell, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and his passionate and tender letters to her throughout all their life together form the basis for his module in 'Devotion'. Littleton Groom was also a devout Christian, with a lifetime involvement in church organisations.

Between 1891 and his entry to federal parliament on his father's death, Groom practised as a barrister in Brisbane, and was appointed a deputy District Court judge in 1900.

Littleton Groom was a Protectionist, and a strong Australian nationalist. Many of the causes and issues he adopted in his parliamentary career concerned national development and the assertion of Commonwealth power over the states. In 1905 Alfred Deakin made Groom Minister for Home Affairs in his Protectionist government.

He also saw science, and in particular northern development, as a key to national defence. A crucial aid to national development was a Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology. On 1 August 1906, as Minister for Home Affairs, he introduced legislation in Parliament to create a federal Bureau of Meteorology.

Littleton Groom was responsible for the negotiations with the states over the federal capital site. He was instrumental in establishing, against state opposition, a Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, and drafted and carried through the parliament legislation for the provision of old age and invalid pensions.

He was not convinced that the non-Labor parties should join in the 'Fusion' government led by Alfred Deakin in 1909, but became Minister for External Affairs in June that year. His most significant achievement there was a bill to provide for an Australian High Commissioner in London.

The Fusion government lost office in April 1910, and was succeeded by Andrew Fisher's Labor government. Littleton Groom was one of the few Liberal Protectionists to keep his seat. When Sir Joseph Cook's Liberal Party won back government in June 1913 Littleton Groom became Minister for Trade and Customs. The Cook government fell to Labor just over a year later, on the eve of the First World War. Littleton Groom enthusiastically supported

the war effort: when his friend William Morris Hughes left the Labor Party after it split over conscription, and formed a Nationalist government with the non-Labor parties, Littleton Groom became assistant Minister for Defence and later Vice-President of the Executive Council; and was, as Minister for Works and Railways from March 1918, responsible for the construction of Canberra.

He became Attorney-General again in December 1921, introducing a public service superannuation scheme and creating a Public Service Board. In 1924 he led the Australian delegation to Geneva to the fifth Assembly of the League of Nations. He chaired a committee that drafted a protocol for establishing a system of international arbitration. When this was rejected by Australia, Britain and many other League members, he voted for it rather than abstaining as instructed.

Littleton Groom's independence in this matter, his advocacy of the extension of Commonwealth industrial powers, and his handling of the deportation of two leaders of the Seamen's Union in 1925 alienated Stanley Melbourne Bruce. Bruce had replaced Hughes as Prime Minister in early 1923, and formed a coalition with the Country Party, led by Dr Earle Page. Littleton Groom, who had been knighted in 1924 – his regalia of the Order of St Michael and St George is on display in *Eternity* – became Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1926, and presided over the first parliamentary sittings in the new Parliament House in Canberra.

He fell foul of Bruce again in September 1929, when he abstained from voting with the government to pass its *Maritime Industries Bill*, which would have removed the Commonwealth from the sphere of industrial relations. The Bruce-Page government lost power in a landslide – Bruce even lost his own seat. Littleton Groom re-entered federal Parliament in December 1931 as an Independent member for the Darling Downs, and in August 1933 he joined the United Australia Party. He never held ministerial office again. Sir Littleton Groom died of coronary heart disease in Canberra on 6 November 1936.

*Roslyn Russell curated the Mary McConnell and Sir Littleton Groom modules in Eternity*