

13. Francis Mather.

Joseph Francis Mather was born in 1844 in Hobart, son of Quakers Joseph Benson Mather, a tailor, and his wife Anna Maria Cotton. He was educated in Hobart and then worked on his grandfather's country estates, had a brief period with an architect and was an agricultural apprentice at Ross before joining the family clothing business in Hobart, becoming a partner and then eventually the proprietor after his father's death in 1890. He married Margaret Lidbetter in 1874, but sadly she died in 1876. He was a generous employer, and his character and integrity won great respect in the business community. He served on the Hobart Chamber of Commerce, the Savings Bank, the Tourist Association and the Sanitary Association which sought to conserve the natural beauty around Hobart. In keeping with his strong religious convictions, he represented Hobart Friends on the Council of Churches, and was for many years secretary of the Hobart branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

From its early days, the Australian Quaker movement had shown interest in education. The idea of setting up a school had been discussed, partly with the encouragement of English Friends who saw a need for a school in the colonies. An abortive attempt was made in Victoria, but this faltered as Friends saw the easy access of state schools and the likely expense of their own school. Joseph Mather, Clerk of the Hobart Quaker Meeting and father of Francis, then became the central figure in the move to establish a school. He started with a night school for boys, and supported other initiatives to help delinquent boys get training and education. He became concerned at moves by the Government to institute militia training for school students, and he saw this as against the peace testimony of Friends. The Hobart Quakers decided to set up a committee in 1885, with Francis Mather as secretary, and this led to close consultation with English Friends about appropriate funding and staff for a school in Hobart.

Samuel Clemes, a British Friend, was appointed Principal of the School, and his progressive ideas on education, including co-education and an opposition to homework, received strong support from Francis Mather as chair of the Committee. The object of the school was to "secure a superior guarded and religious education for the children of Friends and others in accordance with the Christian principles of the Society of Friends". Francis Mather himself had a clear commitment to a non-secular, non-sectarian institution which stressed both knowledge and character. The school had immediate success, attracting many non-Friend students. In his role as chair, Francis continued for many years to advise the School in a modest and self-effacing way. In many ways, the school was a living monument to his efforts.

An example of the way Francis Mather approached difficult issues was his response to a request from old scholars of The Friends School who wanted to erect an honour board for those former students killed in the First World War. Despite his own pacifist beliefs, he recognised the genuineness of the sentiment,

and agreed to the board being placed in the School with the following inscription: "They followed where their sense of duty led". At the same time he ensured that the School made clear in its public image that it opposed war, did not have a cadet corps, and discouraged celebrations of victory.

Within the Friends Meeting, Francis Mather was an acknowledged minister, and he often spoke of the gradualness of religious growth. To him the Bible showed the unfolding of the righteousness of God. He was also very committed to nonviolence and peace, believing that "war and all violence are contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ". Another area where Francis Mather made his mark was as the first editor of *The Australian Friend*, a Quaker journal that sought to link Friends across Australia. Through that vehicle he wrote extensively on such topics as education, militarism in schools, the history of Quakers in Australia, and contemporary issues. He combined the intellectual and the spiritual in his writings and throughout his life.

Francis Mather married Margaret Thompson, a cousin of his first wife, in 1905. There were no children from either of his marriages. He died in 1925. He was remembered in a leader in the Hobart *Mercury* as 'the good citizen' and for his 'nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love' (a phrase from Wordsworth).

References:

- *Australian Dictionary of Biography*
- *Dictionary of Australian Quaker Biography*
- William Oats, *The Rose and the Waratah* (1979).