

Spotlight on Members' Research

Western Australia's Engineer-in-Chief

History West thanks member Mike Taylor for sharing his research findings and correcting the historical record. Mike is a retired engineer, member of Engineering Heritage Western Australia, a busy historian and library volunteer.

Having worked as an engineer in the Public Works Department (PWD), I was intrigued to read in an article by Martyn Webb that 'C Y O'Connor was appointed Western Australia's first Engineer-in-Chief on 26 May 1891' [*Early Days*, 11, 1, 1995]. This statement may have come from the 1965 biography of C Y O'Connor by Alexandra Hasluck which states that O'Connor 'came to Western Australia as its first Engineer-in-Chief'. A PWD honour board also supports the impression of O'Connor as its first 'engineering head'.



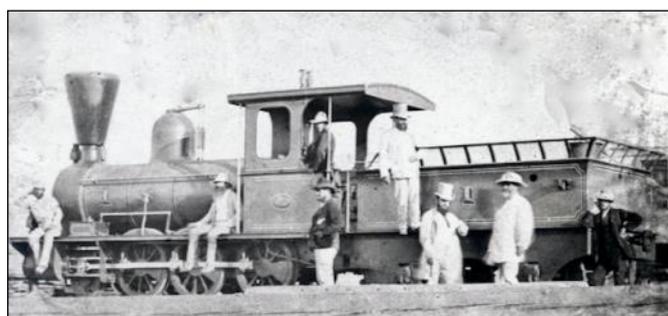
PWD Honour Board 1985. Photographer M Taylor

However, as it is generally recognised that the PWD started in 1876, I wondered who O'Connor's predecessors were. In researching this question, it helps to understand position titles and what they mean in an English public service tradition. The first engineering appointment in WA was Henry Reveley as Civil Engineer. As the title suggests, his authority was limited and his role was to design and construct works as directed by the Governor. Reveley was followed by a number of appointees with the titles of Superintendent of Public Works and Clerk of Works, titles that indicate practical experience rather than professional qualifications.

With the departure of the Royal Engineers and an increase in government works, it was decided in 1874 that Malcolm Fraser, Surveyor General, would take on

the additional role of Commissioner of Works. The title Commissioner, still used today, implies that the appointee has a very broad role in advising government, with service that can be terminated only by parliament. Generally, commissioners rely on their staff for professional expertise, historical exceptions being appointees to the Commissioner of Railways and Commissioner of Main Roads which required engineering qualifications.

Government's first railway between Geraldton and Northampton started construction in October 1874. Recognising that there would be more railways as well as additional telegraphic and marine works, government decided to recruit an experienced NSW engineer, James Henry Thomas, to be WA's Government Engineer. Thomas started in May 1876 on a salary of £450 per year. In November 1876 his title was re-designated to Director of Public Works. In 1878 he was given the additional responsibility of Commissioner of Railways with a salary of £600 per year. On 22 February 1879 Thomas was appointed a member of Executive Council. [WA Blue Books 1879, 1882, 1883].



Lead mines at Northampton - First Locomotive 1879. P2013.96

Following Thomas's unexpected death in July 1884, government recruited John Arthur Wright in June 1885 as Director of Works, Engineer-in-Chief and Commissioner of Railways on a salary of £900 per year [WA Blue Book 1886]. Wright was also appointed to Executive Council and Legislative Council.

The decision to recruit an Engineer-in-Chief was recommended in an 8 August 1884 report by a Legislative Council Select Committee chaired by S H Parker [Le Page, *Building a State*, 1986]. At that time, Engineer-in-Chief was a common position in the other colonies and, as implied by the title, the appointee was accountable for all government engineering.

A comparison of salaries at that time reveals that Governor Broome was paid £3,000 per year, Chief Justice Onslow £1,000, Colonial Secretary Fraser £900, Engineer-in-Chief Wright £900 and Treasurer Lefroy £650. Surveyor General Forrest, Postmaster General Gahan, Commissioner of Titles James and Commissioner of Police Phillips were all paid £600, Colonial Surgeon Waylen £450, while the average wage was about £50 per year [WA Blue Book 1888].

With expanding railways and other works increasing his responsibilities, Wright sought an increase in salary. This was not approved and in December 1890 he resigned from his government posts and took up the

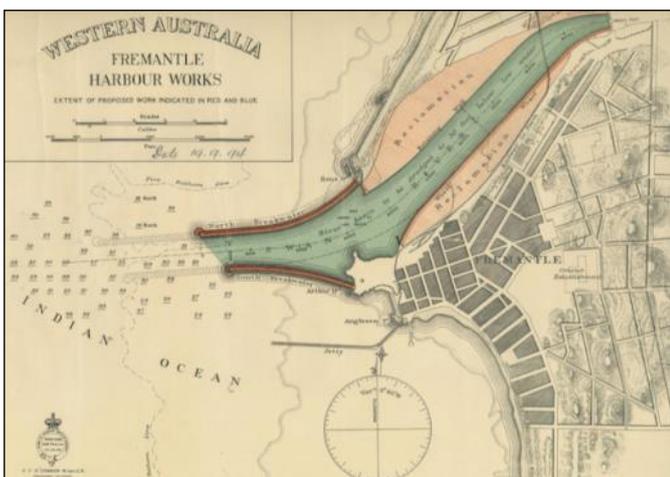
position of General Manager of the Western Australian Land Company and Great Southern Railway.



Albany Land Company Jetty 1889. P2014.776

It was Wright's resignation that triggered the need for Forrest to recruit C Y O'Connor as Engineer-in-Chief, a position that O'Connor had missed out on in New Zealand. Having turned down an offer of £1,000 per year, O'Connor ultimately accepted an offer of £1,200 per year, still less than the £1,500 per year that Wright was now earning with the Great Southern Railway [Tauman, *The Chief, C Y O'Connor*, 1978].

Wright was respected by government and, between his resignation and O'Connor's arrival, he provided engineering consultancy services. He was also quite supportive of O'Connor's proposals, providing evidence to the January 1892 Joint Select Committee inquiring into Fremantle harbour works and, in March 1892, speaking in support of the river mouth scheme as a member of the Legislative Council [Le Page, *Building a State*].



Fremantle Harbour Proposed Works 1894 - Drawer 30 M15

After O'Connor, there were three more appointees as Engineer-in-Chief: Charles Palmer (1902-1904), James Thompson (1904-1925) and Frank Stileman (1925-1930). Following a re-organisation of Public Works in 1930, Edward Tindale, who was Commissioner of Main Roads, took on the additional role of Director of Works and Building [Le Page, *Building a State*].

Tindale and all subsequent appointees through to the closure of the PWD on 30 June 1985 were titled

Director. This title, similar to that of Thomas in 1876, reflected the role which was now limited to accountability for the works performed by the Engineering Division of the PWD. The Architectural Division of the PWD had its own structural engineers, while Fremantle Ports, WA Government Railways, Main Roads Department and the Metropolitan Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage Board all had their own engineering organisations.

So the questions remain — why aren't James Thomas and John Wright recognised on the PWD Honour Board and why isn't Wright recognised as the first Engineer-in-Chief? One answer may be that O'Connor's achievements were so remarkable that the efforts of his predecessors are not noticed or considered worthy of mention. Another answer may come from the culture of a traditional public service. As public pay is generally less than private, part of the compensation is an expectation of recognition on retirement. Historically, anyone who leaves before retirement, particularly for a better paying private industry job, is considered to have relinquished that expectation.



John A Wright 1894

A biography in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* of John Arthur Wright is available online and, as a Member of Parliament, he is included in the *Biographical Register of Members of the Parliament of WA*. James Henry Thomas is also in the *Biographical Register* and, as he is buried in East Perth Cemeteries, is included in the Cemeteries' website. An obituary for Thomas is also available from the Institution of Civil Engineers in London. More information on Western Australian engineers is available from the Engineering Heritage Western Australia website at <http://ehwa.wikidot.com>

Mike Taylor