

# Edward Hippius Bromby

## The first librarian at the University of Melbourne

Philip G. Kent

The life of Edward Hippius Bromby (1847–1938) gives us an insight into the educated middle class of early colonial Melbourne and its members' social and career connections. Bromby was born into a family of clergy on 6 January 1847 in Bristol. His father, Dr John Edward Bromby, was from a clerical family and received his Bachelor of Arts in 1832 at Cambridge, earning a second in classics. His interest in the ancient texts may have inspired his son's exotic middle name:<sup>1</sup> the deity Neptune was sometimes called Hippius amongst other names 'from his regulation of horsemanship',<sup>2</sup> while Colonus Hippius, mentioned by Sophocles, was a holy place near Athens: 'The epithet Hippius belonged to the God Poseidon, as horse-creating and horse-taming; it was given to this place because Poseidon Hippius was worshipped there'.<sup>3</sup>

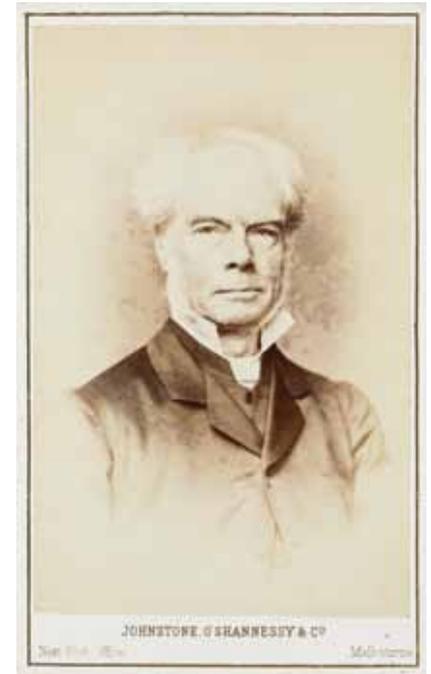
Edward's learned father played an important role throughout his son's life and provided many social and career connections. While at Cambridge in 1829 John Bromby competed with Tennyson for the chancellor's medal in poetry, the subject that year being 'Timbuctoo'.<sup>4</sup> Although Tennyson won the medal with his famous poem, Bromby maintained throughout his life that his own poem was better! Another famous

connection was that during John Bromby's time as a school principal in Guernsey, Hugh Childers was one of his pupils. Years later, Childers became auditor-general in Victoria, governor of Melbourne Grammar School and one of the founders of the University of Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> Dr Bromby's father was a first cousin of the wife of the explorer Captain Matthew Flinders. In 1803 Flinders named the Bromby Islets in the Gulf of Carpentaria after his 'worthy friend', the Reverend John Bromby senior.

In 1857 Dr Bromby was offered the founding headmastership of Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. The Bromby family—comprising Dr Bromby, his wife Mrs Eliza Bromby, five sons, five daughters and two maids—arrived in Australia aboard the *Countess of Elgin* on 1 February 1858.

Melbourne Grammar School opened on 7 April 1858 with 86 students and 24 boarders.<sup>6</sup> These included the Bromby sons; Edward was number 16 on the school roll. He and his brothers slept in the school dormitories with the boarders. Thus Edward began a lifetime association with his school and the social connections it facilitated. Wilmot aptly states: 'The history of the school [Melbourne Grammar]

is the history of Victoria'.<sup>7</sup> Edward won a foundation scholarship in 1859, while his brothers Christopher, Ernest, Frederick and Robert also had distinguished records at the school, winning many prizes between them.



Dr Bromby (pictured above) was learned, witty and charming, winning the admiration of his students. Alfred Deakin, for example, recalled that Bromby had a 'fine breezy, humorous, prompt, passionate and impressive personality'.<sup>8</sup>

Previous page: Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co., Dr John Bromby, 1865, albumen silver carte-de-visite, 10.7 × 6.5 cm. Accession no. H29432, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Below: Phyllis Bromby, *Walter Withers' studio, Heidelberg*, c. 1903, gelatin silver photograph, 10.0 × 12.0 cm. Accession no. H91.283/26, gift of Mr C. Bromby 1988, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.



Walter Withers' studio, Heidelberg, about 1903; daughters, Gladys Withers, at piano, and Margery Withers, reading.

A public figure, Dr Bromby was appointed to the 1866 royal commission into the educational system, advocated women's right to university education and in 1868 was elected warden of the University of Melbourne Senate. He retired as headmaster of Melbourne Grammar in 1874 'full of honours',<sup>9</sup> but continued to serve as an Anglican priest. Dr Bromby was succeeded

at Melbourne Grammar by Edward Ellis Morris, who was to become a professor at the university, a leading supporter of libraries and chair of the university's Library Committee. Morris was responsible for formalising the library at Melbourne Grammar, and Alexander Leeper, a master at the school, was appointed its first librarian in 1875. Leeper was to become warden of Trinity College

at the University of Melbourne. Throughout Edward Bromby's life the intersection between education, libraries, the church and associated personalities continued. Although the University of Melbourne was to be a secular institution, the church and its hierarchy were pivotal in the life of the early town and its society.

Edward Bromby's association with the university commenced when he appeared as number 97 on the matriculation roll in 1863 and in 1866 was the 56th person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts from the university. Edward played university football and walked to the campus from South Yarra, there being no tram service yet. Following his studies at Melbourne, Edward progressed to Queen's College, Oxford, where he rowed for his college and sang in the choir. He studied mathematics, classics and Greek, leading to the award of his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1870. A reference from the dean of Queen's College attests that Bromby was 'a gentleman of unblemished character, great industry, varied attainments and good intelligence'.<sup>10</sup>

Back in Melbourne, Edward continued his university studies and was number 104 on the roll for those awarded a Master of Arts in 1873. He embarked on a career as a private

*Officers of the University of Melbourne, 1894, photographic print, 10.0 × 14.5 cm. Standing, left to right: Edward Bromby (librarian), Frank Gladish (porter), John Steele Robertson (medical librarian), Philip Marchman (bellringer). Seated, left to right: John James (assistant registrar), Edward a'Beckett (registrar), Frederick Dickson (accountant). UMA/I/1292, University of Melbourne Archives.*



tutor then taught at Melbourne Grammar from 1875 to 1880 under the headmastership of Edward Ellis Morris.

In 1880 Bromby, who now had a young wife and family, moved to the East Leigh Girls School in Hawksburn, where he was

headmaster, his wife supervised the domestic arrangements and two of his sisters assisted with the teaching. But Edward and his family experienced calamity in 1888. Following the happy birth of a second daughter, Phyllis, Bromby's wife Jane and their ten-year-old

daughter Dorothea both died within six months. At the age of 41, Edward became a widowed father with two sons and a baby daughter.

A change in career occurred the following year, when Edward secured the post of assistant librarian at the University of Melbourne. He was

recommended for this role by his old boss Edward Morris, who had been appointed professor of modern languages and literature at the university in 1884.<sup>11</sup> Morris was a devout Anglican and a member of the council of Trinity College. He was also a trustee of the Public Library and with Bromby would be a member of the organising committee for the first Intercolonial Library Conference, held in Melbourne in 1896.

The position at the university brought stability into Edward's life and in 1892 he was promoted to the post of first librarian, again on Morris's recommendation. Edward then married Edith Browne. The couple established their family home in Heidelberg and became active in the life of the local church, continuing Edward's parallel career in organ and choral music.<sup>12</sup> The artist Walter Withers and his family settled in Heidelberg in 1894. His daughters Gladys and Margery became close friends with Edward's daughter Phyllis, a keen photographer who documented family life.

Bromby's career as librarian at the University of Melbourne is documented in greater detail in another publication.<sup>13</sup> A rare photograph of Bromby (see page 13)

highlights the small number of administrative staff at the university in 1894.

Following an illness, in 1903–04 Edward Bromby took leave of absence from the university to travel with Edith and Phyllis to England for nine months. Their detailed journals survive in the family papers. Edward's distinctive handwriting documents their visits to family and friends throughout England and Scotland, including old colleagues from Oxford. They visited a great number of churches and their descriptions feature details of architecture and music. While in London Bromby visited relatives, including Captain Matthew Flinders' grandson, the eminent archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie. The journal records Bromby's fascination with 'pots and pans of several thousand years ago'.<sup>14</sup>

Another aspect of family life centred on the wilderness in the Dandenong Ranges to the east of Melbourne. Around 1874 Bromby took up a selection of land at Gembrook, which served as a retreat for the family. Another surviving photograph (opposite) of Edward depicts their leisure pursuits.

Edward's association with Melbourne Grammar School, where he had been educated and had

taught, endured. From 1903 he was a member of the school council and chaired the committee that produced the school history. The preface states:

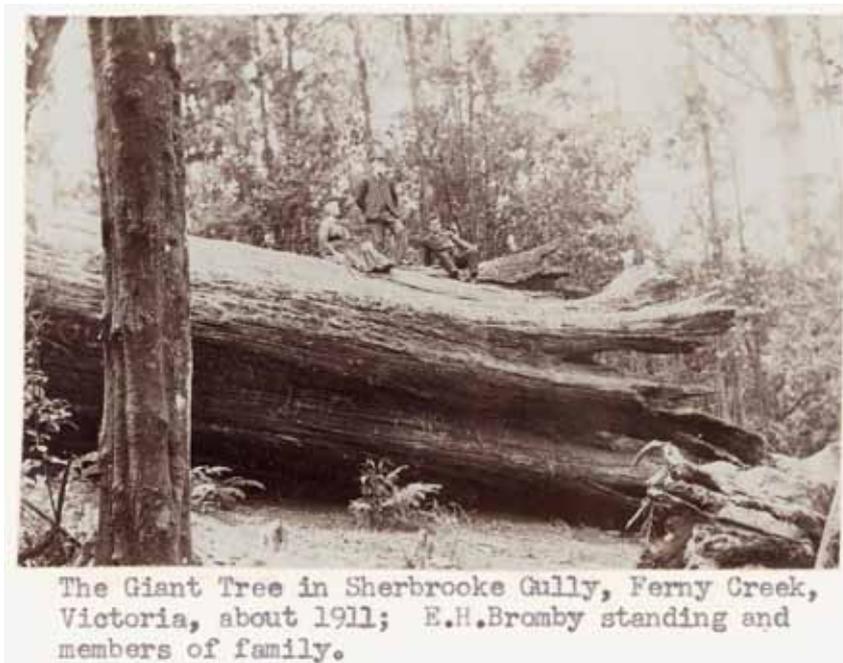
Who with infinite pains and great research has checked the University records, not only of Melbourne, but also of other Universities of which information was required, Mr Bromby's knowledge of the early days of the School—he was one of those who attended on the opening day—has been invaluable, and it has been a great factor in the success of the work that a son of the 'dear old doctor' should be associated with it.<sup>15</sup>

Continuing illness and the arduousness of the post of university librarian prompted Bromby to retire in December 1915. He and Edith moved to their seaside home in Flinders, the town named after Edward's relative Matthew Flinders. But in 1918 the couple returned to live in East Malvern, where Edith died in 1935. Edward died at the age of 91 in 1938 and was buried alongside Edith, his famous father and other family members in the Melbourne General Cemetery, close to the university where he had served for 26 years.

Phyllis Bromby, *The Giant Tree in Sherbrooke Gully, Ferny Creek, Victoria, about 1911; E.H. Bromby standing and members of family*, c. 1911, gelatin silver photograph, 8.0 × 11.0 cm. Accession no. H91.283/34, gift of Mr C. Bromby 1988, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Key influences in the life of Edward Hippius Bromby were school, university, church and family (in particular his father). Through these connections he associated with many important individuals in Melbourne's early formative years.

Philip G. Kent is University of Melbourne librarian. As a result of his degree in history and interest in genealogy, he is researching the history of his predecessors and their influence on the university and library.



- 1 The derivation of Edward's middle name is not documented in the family history. The inaugural roll of Melbourne Church of England Grammar School lists his older brothers simply as Christopher and Ernest Bromby, while the entry for Edward includes Hippius. (Christopher Bromby, 'Edward Hippius Bromby and his world: A biographical sketch', 1979, papers of Edward Hippius Bromby, box 1611/1 in Bromby Family Papers 1700–1979, MS 11102, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.)
- 2 Samuel Boyse, *The new pantheon: Or, fabulous history of the heathen gods, goddesses,*

- heroes*, 1786, in *18th-century collections online*, accessed 18 May 2013.
- 3 R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The plays and fragments: Part II: The Oedipus Coloneus*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1885.
- 4 Manning Clark, 'Bromby, John Edward (1809–1889)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 3, Melbourne University Press, 1969.
- 5 H.L. Hall, 'Childers, Hugh Culling Eardley (1827–1896)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 3, Melbourne University Press, 1969.
- 6 R.W.E. Wilmot (ed.), *Liber Melburniensis 1858–1914: A history of the Church of England Grammar School, Melbourne*, Melbourne: Arbuttle, Waddell and Fawckner, 1914, p. xxi.
- 7 Wilmot, *Liber Melburniensis*.
- 8 Clark, 'Bromby, John Edward'.
- 9 Clark, 'Bromby, John Edward'.
- 10 Papers of Edward Hippius Bromby, box 1611/1 in Bromby Family Papers 1700–1979, MS 11102, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
- 11 In 1899 the university awarded Morris its first doctorate of letters. (Olive Wykes, 'Morris, Edward Ellis (1843–1902)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, 1974.)
- 12 The Bromby family papers at the State Library of Victoria include a number of musical compositions and arrangements attributed to Edward.
- 13 Philip G. Kent, 'The librarian, his books and his library: The contribution of the first librarian to the University of Melbourne', *The Australian Library Journal*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2013, pp. 100–10.
- 14 Edward Hippius Bromby, journal (written in England), 9 September 1903 – 29 June 1904. Box 1610/5b in Bromby Family Papers 1700–1979, MS 11102, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria.
- 15 Wilmot, *Liber Melburniensis*, p. ix.