

# An appointment with Dr King: Stories behind a Melbourne ghost sign

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His name appeared at a construction site near the corner of Lonsdale and Russell Streets, Melbourne, in April 2013. The building on the corner had been demolished and the painted sign—hidden for many years—was exposed again, high on an adjacent building. Taking up nearly half the wall at second storey level, facing south down Russell Street, it proclaimed in large black capitals: ‘Consult celebrated specialist Dr King, MRCS. Consultation free.’

No address, no phone number. No hint about what kind of specialist Dr King was.

Perhaps other people wandering past that site, or standing at the pedestrian crossing waiting for the lights to change, looked up and wondered as I did: who was Dr King?

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A couple of years ago a friend alerted me to ghost signs—faded, hand-painted advertisements for products and businesses that no longer exist. I started seeing them everywhere, especially around inner suburbs like Richmond, Fitzroy and Yarraville. Sometimes ghost signs are deliberately preserved as a retro feature, but the ones I prefer survive through benign neglect, advertising some long-gone plumber, blacksmith or butcher, enterprises like the Melbourne Steamship Company or Sands & McDougall, or forgotten products like Ecks lemonade, Preservene Soap, Mazda light globes, Wertheim sewing machines, Greys cigarettes and Guest’s biscuits.

Ghost signs are beautiful and mysterious in themselves, but they are also evocative windows into social and industrial history. A sign on the rear wall of a pub advertises drinking hours until 6pm (the famous ‘six o’clock swill’, abolished in 1966); the signage on the Younghusband warehouses in Kensington—currently occupied by small shops and arts organisations—remind us that for years this was a centre for tallow, hides and wool. At every step, if we open our eyes, we are alerted to the stories that populate the streets we walk in.

Walter Benjamin wrote in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’: ‘To lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. The signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet ...’ Each of these ghost signs is a crackling twig which can catch our attention and put us on the alert.

Thanks to the internet, you can easily find out something about most ghost signs. A few clicks enable you to learn the basic facts about the Melbourne Steamship Company. But many have faded away almost to nothing, leaving only a few stray letters to tease the eye, and in that case it’s a challenge to find out more. Even when the sign is complete, the story is not, and for me that is what makes them appealing. I love the gap that opens up for the imagination between the known and the unknown. So when I saw the sign advertising the ‘celebrated specialist, Dr King’, I wondered what had become of him.

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I asked Stephen Banham, a typography expert, about the age of the typeface. He immediately picked it as late Victorian: ‘The character and strength lies in the beautiful wedge serifs and the diagonal leg of the K.’ This made it particularly

interesting. Most ghost signs that I've seen date from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century—I haven't come across many as old as Dr King's.

The definitive history of Melbourne in late Victorian times is *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne* by Graeme Davison. Davison describes an era of extravagance, accompanied by an orgy of building, land speculation and commercial activity which collapsed in spectacular fashion in the '90s (a pattern repeated in the twentieth century). The population almost doubled from 1880-1890, touching half a million. The city was a magnet for characters seeking their fortune.

The Melbourne medical world was in a state of flux, and Davison provides an account of the ways it attempted to reform and regulate itself. Among practitioners of the time were picturesque figures like the surgeon James Beaney, famous for working in a blood-stained coat, sporting diamond rings and quaffing champagne with those of his patients who survived. Simultaneously, a new breed of young medical graduates emerging from Melbourne University wanted to introduce a more scientific, professional approach.

And then there were the 'quacks'. The term was used for anyone outside the medical mainstream, ranging from herbalists, homeopaths, and others who genuinely believed in alternative therapies to spiritual healers and outright con artists. The nineteenth century was a golden age of quackery in many parts of the world and Melbourne was no exception. The profession was largely unregulated in Victoria and no law prevented unqualified laymen from performing procedures, a fact much railed against by doctors' associations. But Attorney-General Alfred Deakin was unwilling to introduce legislation, preferring to let the market sort it out. As Davison puts it, Deakin was 'determined to maintain the "rights" of dissident schools of professional thought, such as homeopathy and herbalism, and the vested interests of unqualified, but indispensable, bush practitioners.'

Whatever mainstream doctors thought, alternative practitioners had the right to set up practices among their more respectable fellows at the top of Collins Street, Spring Street and near the Melbourne Hospital in Lonsdale Street.

Where did Dr King fit into this picture?

I went looking for him in the Sands & McDougall directories. Sands & McDougall was a printing firm that published a comprehensive annual directory of Melbourne households and businesses for more than a century, from 1862 to 1974. As the years went by, it became thicker, heavier and bulkier—the later editions ran to more than 2000 pages and weighed five kilos. Sands & McDougall was the Google of its day.

I went through editions from 1870 to 1900, cross-checking the alphabetical list of names; the 'Physicians and medical practitioners'; and the street directory. The first mention of a Dr King (no first name, no initial) was in 1889, at 28 Russell Street. In 1890 he reappeared a few doors down, on the corner of Russell Street and Flinders Lane. This time there was a name and initial: Dr James W. King. Dr King's two appearances don't suggest a long and distinguished career, in Melbourne at any rate. But he didn't lack hubris. Anyone who commissions an advertising sign that size means to make a splash.

I checked Our Fading Past, a website of Melbourne ghost signs. A fellow enthusiast had posted a link to similar advertisements in Melbourne and country newspapers stored in the National Library of Australia's online archive, Trove. This one appeared in *The Kerang Times* in March 1890:

**‘Public notice!**

The Australian Medical Institute has engaged the eminent specialist Dr King, MRCS Etc as its chief medical officer. Dr King has enjoyed an exceptionally large practice as a specialist. He is a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and legally qualified registered general practitioner in Victoria.’

That sounds pretty good, if a bit self-glorifying. But the ad goes on:

‘The above named institute has also succeeded in obtaining the valuable services of a highly accomplished MEDICAL CLAIRVOYANT whose power in diagnosing disease and discovering the exact state of a patient is truly wonderful. . . . No questions need be asked, all that is required is a letter written by the person, or a lock of hair, neither of which must be touched by others than the one sending; this is all that is required to assure a most concise and complete diagnosis of the patient’s condition. Fee for such diagnosis 10s 6d. Treatment and diagnosis £1. Call on our address Dr J King, 42 Russell St, corner of Flinders Lane, Melbourne.’

By now I had serious doubts about Dr King’s methods, but if he was genuinely a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS) then he presumably had some medical credibility. I emailed the archivist at the College in London, who replied that there was no trace of a Dr James W King in their medical register or directory during the relevant period.

That seemed to settle it. He was a quack.

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Let’s call her Agnes.

She’s a farmer’s wife in a country town. They farm oats and barley. A couple of horses, a few cattle. The town is doing all right—irrigation methods have been successful, and the population has grown to about a thousand. There’s a new railway connection; churches, a school, a general store. Life is a struggle, but the family’s not doing badly.

But Agnes hasn’t been feeling well. She’s a tough country woman and doesn’t make a fuss—with a bunch of little ones, and work from morning til night, she doesn’t have time to fall ill. If she gets a headache, she just puts on tighter shoes to take her mind off it. There’s no doctor in town, so nostrums from the local chemist are all she can get her hands on. She’s put up with it for months. But the headaches are blinding and lasting for days, and nothing seems to help.

Then she sees an advertisement in the local newspaper. ‘All that is required is a letter written by the person, or a lock of hair ...’ Agnes has some money put aside. She deliberates for weeks—10/6 is not a small sum—but she’s desperate. Eventually, after a day when she is almost crying from pain, she thrusts the money into an envelope along with a lock of her hair and sends it to Dr King at 42 Russell Street.

The doctor has his feet up on his desk when the letter arrives, idly wondering whether it’s time to invest in a new embroidered waistcoat. It may look a little flash, but he doesn’t care about that. He’d called a cheery greeting to a University medical man on Collins Street that morning, but the damned puppy had the cheek to cut him! They won’t be laughing when he’s riding the streets in a coach and four. He opens Agnes’s letter, scans it, pockets the money, tosses the lock of hair into the waste-paper basket, yells for the slovenly larrikin who serves as his office boy.

‘Send this creature a letter, will you?’

‘Which one?’

‘Dangerous condition of the kidneys. And a price list.’

With that taken care of, he turns his mind to another question. Recently, the medical associations—or the doctors’ trade unions, as he calls them—have been broadcasting abuse of alternative practitioners like himself all over the press, even getting in the attorney-general’s ear to have them struck off for ‘imposture’. King cares nothing for the attacks on his qualifications and character. In his own mind, he’s a perfectly good doctor. Why, he would have a degree himself, if it wasn’t for that little matter of the girl and the laudanum. But the constant attacks could undermine his business. He seizes pen and paper and composes a thundering riposte:

‘Remember Dr King is a Qualified and Registered Physician, and not a Quack. He is a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and duly authorised to practise as a specialist in the British provinces. Dr King warns the reader against the bareface imposters, so called specialists, etc, who having only a money end in view, thrive on the credulity of this community by their fraudulent announcements. He guarantees to cure every case undertaken.’

When the lad slouches back in, King hands him the notice and tells him to run it down to the newspaper office.

A few weeks pass. Agnes’s condition is worse. She opened her letter from the ‘medical clairvoyant’ with great excitement, but the brief diagnosis—which seemed to disregard her symptoms—disappointed her, especially as it was accompanied by pages of advertising and enthusiastic endorsements for Dr King’s patent elixir. All the same, she sent off for a bottle, guaranteed to cure all diseases of the head, liver, heart and lungs. The elixir provides temporary relief, even a short-lived euphoria. But the headaches return, and Agnes finds herself taking larger doses for the same effect. She raids her savings and sends another letter to Dr King, earnestly craving a larger supply. And then she waits. And waits.

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The medical profession succeeded in professionalising itself to some extent during the 1880s. The Medical Society of Victoria, run by a clique of venerable old-timers, was challenged by the British Medical Association (Victorian branch) which attracted younger, local graduates. The BMA fought for the establishment of a medical council to regulate the profession and kick out any doctor guilty of ‘infamous conduct’. They argued that this would benefit the public by protecting them from quacks, but the counter-argument—that they were trying to set up a closed shop—prevailed. Many of the general public were supportive of ‘irregular’ practitioners, who were sometimes the only option, especially in rural areas. (Doctors would not gain the right to exclude practitioners for ‘infamous conduct’ until 1933). The public debate around these issues must at least have raised public awareness about quack doctors, if it did nothing to rein them in.

Dr King wasn’t the only medical clairvoyant in town—this was a popular therapy in the late nineteenth-century, according to medical historian Philippa Martyr, author of *Paradise of quacks: an alternative history of medicine in Australia*. Related to spiritualism, medical clairvoyance involved diagnosing and curing patients with the assistance of spirits or by using an object close to the patient. A furious article in *The Age* in January 1872 complained that even physicians from Melbourne University were consulting a well-known medium. “Seriously, we ask what is the profession coming to in this colony? Where is this demoralizing humbug to end?”

In the early 1890s the land speculation bubble burst, with drastic consequences: bank runs, financial collapses, panic, bankruptcies, unemployment. The prosperity of

the 1880s had enabled Melburnians to afford medical care. The number of ‘medical men’ doubled during a decade, from 202 to 420. After the crash, the number declined again. Perhaps some of the quacks were driven out, or sought more profitable pastures.

It’s impossible to know what happened, but by 1891 Dr King and his institute had disappeared from the Russell Street address, which was now occupied (according to Sands & McDougall) by a Miss Frewen and a registry office. No Dr Kings appeared in the list of medical practitioners. All that remained of Dr King was his advertising sign.

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Agnes stands on the corner of Russell Street and Flinders Lane. Her youngest baby is in her arms, her three-year-old fretfully pulling at her hand. She is hot, exhausted and desperate: it has cost her the last of her savings to get here by train — her first ever trip on the new railway—in the hope of getting more of Dr King’s elixir, or at least her money back. But now that she is here, the Australian Medical Institute—whose crest looked so impressive on the letter—turns out to be a chimera. The brisk young lady at number 42 has never heard of the Institute or Dr King—she only took the lease a few weeks ago—and looks askance at Agnes’s unfashionable clothes, her attitude of manic desperation. She seems to suspect Agnes of some immoral purpose. Now the door is closed and Agnes walks slowly along Russell Street, not knowing or caring where she is, only that her head is splitting, she has a craving she can never fulfil, and all her savings are gone.

One could turn it into a Victorian melodrama. Maybe she heads up Russell Street, over the hill, towards the opium dens of Little Bourke Street. Maybe she turns the other way and heads towards the Yarra. Or she could simply take the train home to Kerang. We will never know.

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Was that the last that Melbourne saw of Doctor King?

A footnote to the story suggests that he may have made a comeback a little later. Although his name disappeared from the next few editions of the street directory, a Dr King surfaced in 1895, this time associated with the ‘Eclectic Remedy Agency’ at 323 Collins Street.

‘Eclectic medicine’ was a popular therapy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Originating in the United States, it was based on herbal remedies and was regarded by many as a legitimate school of medicine. To the Melbourne medical establishment, though, it would have been another variant of quackery. Was this Dr King the same man, making a brief attempt at a revival? Or was he a different, more legitimate Dr King? Either way, the Eclectic Remedy Agency was short-lived. By 1897 it too had vanished, and no more Dr Kings appear in the Sands & McDougall directories during the late Victorian era.

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I don’t know whether there were two Dr Kings or just one. But I like to imagine them as the same person. The Dr King of my imagination is ‘celebrated’ more for his fast talking, brash persona and flashy, boom-town style than his medical skills. These

days he would have his own infotainment show in the small hours of the morning, specialising in erectile dysfunction, male baldness and miracle weight loss treatments. Characters like him helped to define Melbourne in the 1890s, as the white shoe brigade of corporate crooks defined the 1980s. Respectable city worthies are memorialised in statues and oil paintings, but the shameless Dr King cheekily popped up again in Russell Street to promote himself to Melburnians more than a century later.

What of the ghost sign? I went back in November 2013 to have another look. The new building—a Hellenic Cultural Centre—was well under way, and one of the site workers told me that Dr King’s sign would be obliterated. That wall’s coming down, he said, it’s not structurally safe. Even if we saved it, no one would ever see it. Shortly afterwards, the sign was gone.

That may be appropriate. Dr King wasn’t a long-standing pillar of the Melbourne community. He was a dubious self-promoter who blazed across the city for a short time. So it’s only fitting that his advertisement should share the same fate, reappear out of nowhere, trumpet his name down Russell Street for a few months, then disappear—this time for ever.