



CHAPTER TWO

Growth and Glamour 1880–1904



'Boat builders sheds on the Yarra River, below Princes Bridge, including James Edwards & Sons Boat Builders' c.1888. Photographer Charles B Walker. The signage on the building on the right (closest to the camera) reads 'University' and 'Civil Service Rowing Clubs RS Fuller Boat Builder Est. 1858'
State Library of Victoria picture collection

1880 and 1881 were interesting years at Melbourne University. Redmond Barry died in 1880, bringing an era to an end. 1881 legislation brought reforms to the University, including the admission of women. This confirmed a decision previously made within the University after a long and bitter battle. At first women were confined to Arts, the first woman graduate being Bella Guerin in 1883. In 1887 women were admitted to Medicine.¹ Women were also allowed to be non-residential members at both Trinity College, which had been established in 1872, and the newly formed Ormond College in 1881. With the establishment of the Trinity Women's Hostel (later to become Janet Clarke Hall) in 1886, Trinity admitted women as resident students, making it the first university college in Australia to do so.² The establishment of Ormond College was of particular significance to the Boat Club because it enabled competition with Trinity.

The colleges

There are now relatively few students living in colleges at Melbourne University in comparison to the entire university population. So it is perhaps difficult to understand the significance of colleges at the time teaching commenced in 1855. But it is best explained by the simple fact that seventy-five (quickly reduced to sixty) of the 100 acres of the University site were set aside for residential colleges, to be founded under the auspices of the churches. Ten acres each were allotted to the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches, the remaining area being reserved for sporting facilities. The Anglican Church was the first to accept the offer, with Trinity College opening in 1872.

At the end of August 1877, Alexander Morrison, Headmaster of Scotch College, received a letter from the Director of the Victorian Education Department, proposing that if the church did not mean to take the land for a college, that it be sold and the proceeds divided equally (half each) between the church and the state for University purposes. This spurred Morrison into action. A subscription list was opened, with a target of £10,000; on this list Francis Ormond's name appears against a donation of £3000. The foundation stone of the College was laid by the Governor of Victoria, His Excellency, the Marquis of Normanby, on 15 November 1879. The formal opening of the College took place on 18 March 1881. At the opening there were twenty students, which soon grew to twenty-four.

The establishment of Ormond College led to a greater change in the rowing habits of members of the Boat Club than any preceding event. The competitions between colleges became the major events. Trinity was closely connected to Geelong Grammar, Xavier (in the years preceding the establishment of Newman College) and Melbourne Grammar, and Ormond was associated with Scotch College.

Steve Fairbairn

The affiliation of schools and colleges meant that young men entering the University often had plenty of rowing experience. One such young man who would become a world famous oarsman, coach and administrator was Steve Fairbairn (b. 25 August 1862), who rowed briefly for the University in 1881, before travelling to England to read Law at

Jesus College, Cambridge. During his seven years at Geelong Grammar (1874–80), he excelled at cricket, football and rowing; was a champion athlete, swimmer and gymnast; helped edit the school 'Quarterly'; and was librarian, dux in mathematics and English, and senior prefect.

During his brief time with MUBC he rowed in several races at the Geelong and Melbourne Regattas on 23 and 26 February 1881. In fact, he rowed in every event in which MUBC participated except the maiden sculls. In the stroke seat for all races except the maiden eight in Geelong, where Professor Irving took that place, it was noted that throughout he 'rowed splendidly & deserves great praise.'³ Fairbairn made such an impression in the short period he rowed for MUBC that the annual report for the 1881–2 season stated that 'the Club had been ... weakened by the loss of two good men, Messrs Graham and Fairbairn, who had both gone home'⁴ (i.e. had returned to England). Although Fairbairn returned to Australia many times, he never rowed for the University again. However, Club records show that he co-coached the intervarsity eight with T Crosthwaite in the 1901 intervarsity race on the Yarra. They took a very close second place behind Sydney over a three-mile course specially chosen to row past Melbourne's main city landmarks beside the river in order to popularise the event (although very few spectators turned up, to John Lang's chagrin).⁵

Fairbairn's fame and brilliance continued to grow throughout his life and he eventually wrote a series of 'Chats on Rowing' and 'Rowing Notes' that were edited by his son. He wrote his autobiography *Fairbairn of Jesus* in 1930 (Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, in his wry commendatory to the autobiography, stated: '... let it pass with no more than a sigh that the author has chosen to entitle this book *Fairbairn of Jesus*. There seems, if I may say so, just a little too much of a claim.'⁶) A style of rowing was named after him and his fame was not restricted to England but extended throughout the world of rowing.

Intercollegiate rowing

The 1881–2 season officially began in May 1881 with the historic first race between men of Ormond and Trinity Colleges. Rowing was expensive, as evidenced by the Club's constant arrears. Boats had to be replaced on a regular basis. The private schools had the resources to participate. It soon became evident that colleges would follow suit and intercollegiate rowing would become a highlight of the rowing calendar.

The intercollegiate course was from the Baths Corner to Edward's Shed on the south bank of the Yarra (near where the present boatsheds are located) and was rowed in four-oared gigs. Both crews had been practising for months and both looked for victory, but Trinity almost immediately took the lead by a length and finished three lengths ahead.⁷ The records proclaimed that 'Dr Allen judged the race excellently, his firing of the pistol at the winning post being the theme of universal acclamation!'⁸ The race was immediately assumed to be an annual event and was repeated on 27 May 1882. Already on this second occasion there was 'a goodly throng of spectators, the number of ladies on the banks being especially noticeable.'⁹ The crews were Trinity: WC Guest (bow), FW Edmonson (2), AP Chase (3), HR Salmon (4), HH Brind (cox); Ormond: F Cole (bow), WS Macarthur (2), P Learmonth (3), B Langton (4), C Simson (cox). This time, the course was from the Botanic Garden's Bridge to Fuller's Shed, on the north side of the Yarra, and



Steve Fairbairn
Courtesy Geelong Grammar School

Geelong Regatta 23 February 1881 (Steve Fairbairn competes for MUBC)

'For the Junior Four Messrs S Fairbairn (st) H Hopkins, J Lang [a former Captain of the Club and not the same person as the later John Lang], M] Ryan and Prell cox represented us. In the preliminary heat we met the Ballarat crew. An interesting race ensued resulting in victory for us by about a length and a half. This victory would have been a much easier one for us had not Lang unfortunately allowed his seat to slip from the slides early in the race. He was thus compelled, at great personal inconvenience, to travel during the rest of the journey on the bars. We all highly appreciated his powers of endurance and determination.' [The final was won by Yarra Yarra by a length]

From the Club's Record Book, vol 2., pp.111–2

THE OARSMAN'S SONG

*The willowy sway of the hands away
And the water boiling aft,
The elastic spring and the steely fling
That drives the flying craft.*

*The steely spring and the musical ring
Of the blade with the biting grip,
And the stretching draw of the bending oar
That rounds the turn with a whip.*

*And the lazy float that runs the boat,
And makes the swing quite true,
And gives the rest that the oarsman blest
As he drives the blade right through.*

*All through the swing he hears the boat sing
As she glides on her flying track
And he gathers aft to strike the craft
With a ringing bell-note crack.*

*From stretcher to oar with drive and draw,
He speeds the boat along.
All whalebone and steel and a willowy feel –
That is the oarsman's song.*

Tim Young, 1980 Australian representative at the Moscow Olympics, points out that this poem, attributed to Steve Fairbairn, certainly contains echoes of the poetry written by the famous Geelong Grammar School teacher of Classics during Fairbairn's time there, JL Cuthbertson (although penned perhaps without quite the same panache and elegance as in Cuthbertson's *Barwon Ballads*). Whatever the literary merits, however, it encapsulates much of Fairbairn's theories of rowing, coupled with the re-creation of the 'feel' of a racing shell on song (with poetic licence allowed for modern technique, equipment and participation by both genders), in a manner that still resonates delightfully with the modern rower.