

# McGregor, John Robert: Clerk 1927

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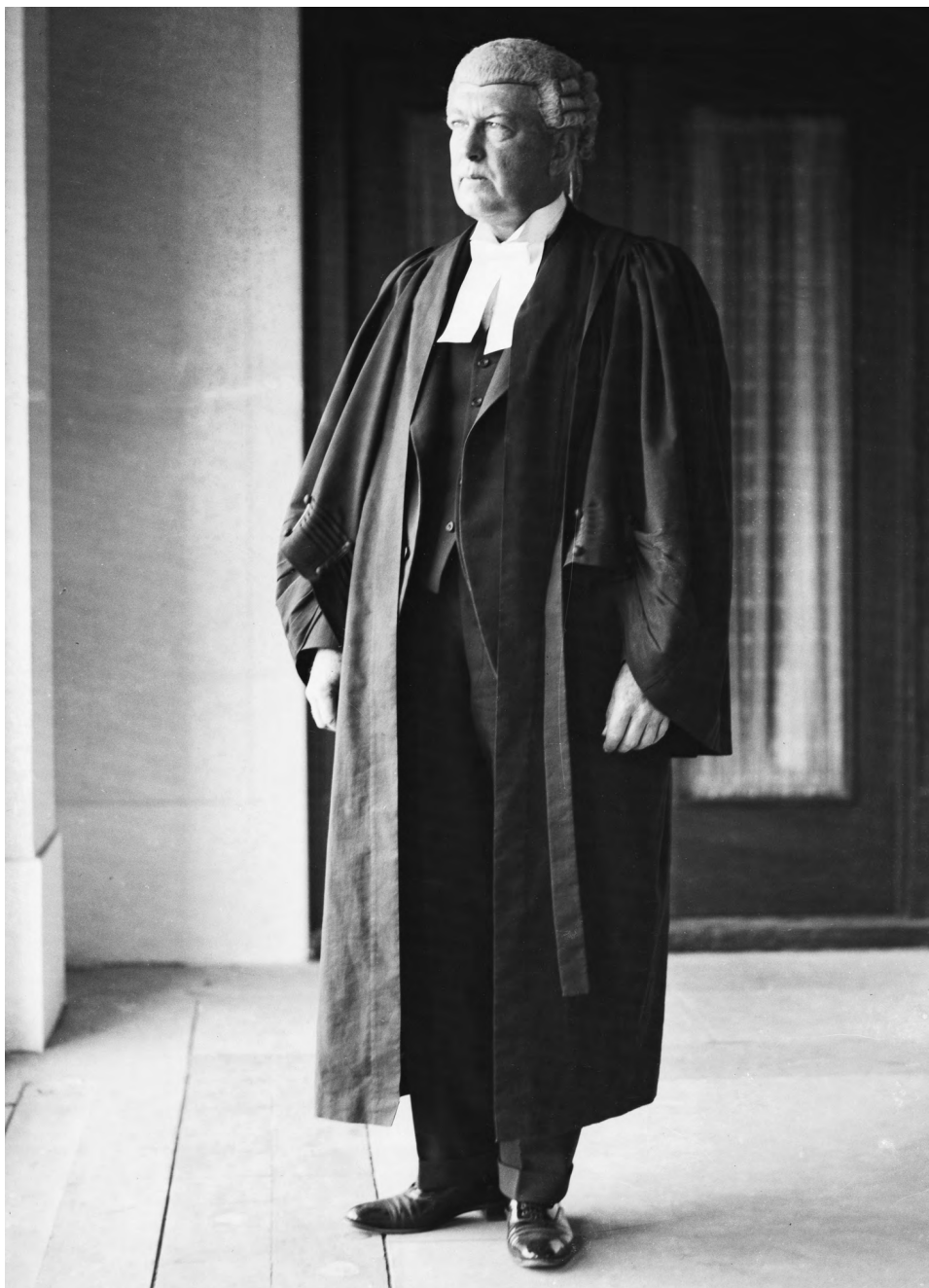
John Robert McGregor (1873–1927), fourth Clerk of the House of Representatives, was born at Boggabri, New South Wales, on Christmas Day 1873. He was the youngest of eight children of James McGregor, farmer, storekeeper, and town postmaster, and his wife, Christina, née McBeath, both Scottish born. His father was active in the local community, including working to establish a cross-denominational union church and a local public school. John studied at East Maitland Grammar School and passed the junior public examination in 1889.

McGregor was appointed Junior Clerk of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly on 1 February 1891. In March 1900, he was transferred to assist the parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works following the dismissal of a predecessor who had been declared bankrupt. He moved to the House of Representatives in the new Commonwealth parliament as Reading Clerk and Assistant Clerk of Committees on 1 May the next year. In Melbourne, he lived with his sister Jessie in suburban Kew.

Commissioned as a second lieutenant in the New South Wales Military Forces in 1900, McGregor continued with the Citizen Military Forces after Federation. Temporarily leaving parliament on volunteering for service in World War I, he was appointed lieutenant in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 18 February 1916 and promoted to captain in May. He embarked from Melbourne in June and, after four months in England, arrived in France on 22 November as a member of the staff of the 22nd (later 867th) Company, Australian Army Service Corps (AASC), 3rd Divisional Train, responsible for transport and the supply of stores and rations.

The state of McGregor's health was such that it is surprising he was accepted for the AIF. After nearly a year on the Western Front, he was diagnosed with chronic bronchitis, from which it was belatedly discovered that he had suffered during most of the previous ten winters. He was hospitalised with psoriasis on 10 September 1917 and for chronic bronchitis two months later while on furlough in England, where he remained. On 8 December 1917, he was attached to AIF Administrative

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**Figure 44: John McGregor.**

Source: National Library of Australia, PIC ROW 14/8/4 #PIC/15611/10535 Fairfax Corporation.

Headquarters, London. His duties included helping to organise the AIF's participation in the December 1917 conscription referendum. Serving alongside him was a future Deputy Speaker, Charles McGrath, who had also been with him in the 22nd Company. McGrath later recalled McGregor as being 'held in the highest esteem by all those who belonged to the company' (H.R. Deb. 30.9.1927, 163).

On 27 February 1918, McGregor was posted as quartermaster of the AASC Training Depot on the Salisbury Plain. In late October, he was declared a disabled officer due to recurrent chronic bronchitis and emphysema. His disability was judged permanent and to have been aggravated by stress. Given his age, it was recommended that he be transferred back to Australia to avoid the forthcoming northern winter, the expectation then being that the war would continue into 1919. Medical reports observed that he 'looks older than his years' (NAA B2455). At war's end, he was 'brought to the notice of the Secretary of State for War for valuable services rendered' (NAA B2455). He returned to Australia on 20 January 1919 and on 9 March his AIF appointment was terminated.

McGregor resumed parliamentary service as accountant to the Commonwealth parliament on 1 July 1919. On 1 April 1921, he was appointed Serjeant-at-Arms and Clerk of Committees. He became a close friend of fellow parliamentary officer Frank Green and the Clerk of the House, Walter Gale. All three were members of Melbourne's bohemian Yorick Club and bushwalked together in the nearby Dandenong Ranges. McGregor was also a keen golfer. On 9 January 1924 at the Prahran registry office, he married Madge Francis Lawrence, twenty-two years his junior and private secretary to Speaker William Watt. His career continued to progress and, on 26 February 1925, he was promoted to Second Clerk Assistant. In April 1927, he transferred to Canberra, just a month before the opening of the new parliament building, becoming Clerk Assistant on 1 July. On 27 July, Gale died suddenly in his Parliament House office and, on 1 September, McGregor became Clerk. So shocked was he by his predecessor's unexpected passing that he refused to occupy Gale's former office for the first three weeks of his appointment. He eventually did so for what proved to be the last week of his own life.

On 28 September, at the start of the first full session of the House in its new building, Gale's death was formally reported to the House and a condolence motion moved. McGregor, in the Clerk's chair, appeared unwell. As Sir Elliot Johnson, a former Speaker, was delivering a tribute to Gale, McGregor slumped forward over his papers. Ministers leapt from the front bench to catch him as he slid to the floor. Unable to move or speak but apparently still conscious, he was carried out of the chamber by several members of parliament, including the medical doctors, the treasurer (Sir) Earle Page, and the minister for health Sir Neville Howse. Green stepped into McGregor's place in the Clerk's seat and Page returned to the chamber to deliver the annual budget speech, but Howse accompanied McGregor to the Canberra Community Hospital

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at the site of the present day Australian National University campus. He stayed with the stricken Clerk until his death from a cerebral haemorrhage at about 7 pm that evening. Howse returned to parliament to inform Prime Minister Stanley (Viscount) Bruce, whereupon the Speaker, Sir Littleton Groom, interrupted the opposition leader's budget reply to inform the House of McGregor's death. Members rose in silent assent to a motion of condolence and then adjourned (VP 1926–27/359, 28.9.1927).

The death of McGregor so soon after that of his predecessor was greeted with dismay. The *Sydney Morning Herald* called it 'the sort of astonishing tragedy that makes life a million times stranger and more exaggerated than fiction', and observed of the assembled members of parliament that 'if the fine white house of parliament had exploded about their ears they could not have been more shocked' (29 September 1927, 11). More than 300 people attended a memorial service conducted in the parliament's King's Hall. Gale's death was widely seen as contributing to that of McGregor. The two were buried adjacent to each other in the graveyard of St John the Baptist Anglican Church, Reid. Pallbearers included Prime Minister Bruce, Groom, the leader of the opposition, Matthew Charlton, Page, McGregor's successor as Clerk, Ernest William Parkes, and (Sir) George Bell, a future Speaker. A year later, Groom unveiled inside the chapel a memorial tablet commemorating both McGregor and Gale, and recalled 'their generous and kindly natures' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1928, 15).

Survived by his wife, McGregor had no children. Of medium height with black hair, grey eyes, and a fair complexion, and described as being 'of modest and retiring disposition' (*Herald* 1927, 2), this once popular parliamentary officer is today known mainly for his untimely passing.

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