

James McEwan, cabinet and chair maker

Notes for Understanding Victoria – Discussions at Government House

Robert La Nauze

Camberwell

22 July 2026

NOTE: James McEwan, cabinet and chair maker should not be confused with James McEwan and Co., ironmonger.

James McEwan, cabinet and chair maker, of 361 Spencer Street was born in Edinburgh c1829, the second son of Thomas McEwan, a cabinet maker and his wife Elizabeth. He arrived in Melbourne in 1852. He married Margaret Kidd in 1859, and they had six children. He is first noted as a woodworker in 1854 as operating a business employing two men. By 1855 McEwan had joined forces with the cabinet maker Alexander McKendrick (c1806-1873) at 78 Errol Street. McKendrick, McEwan's senior of more than twenty years, had worked in Glasgow before arriving in Victoria in 1852 and may have had an association with McEwan's father. In April 1856, McKendrick and McEwan advertised for a wood carver, perhaps to undertake the carving for their submissions to the Victorian Industrial Exhibition later that year at which they exhibited a gold medal winning 'massive sideboard of polished cedar' and a silver medal winning altar or state chair. Soon afterwards they relocated to 361 Spencer Street, West Melbourne where they had further success in Victorian exhibitions: in 1858, a cedar sideboard and blackwood drawing room chiffonier, in 1861 a cedar bookcase and in 1867 a large specimen plank of cedar, 12½ ft by 4½ ft by 2½ in thick. In 1867, McKendrick and McEwan successfully tendered £1,405 for the furniture for the new General Post Office, presumably for the more elaborate components as James Nation was also contracted for furniture valued at £1,328. By 1870 McKendrick had retired from the business, perhaps because of poor health, he died on 4 September 1873 leaving an estate valued at £2,711.¹

In 1870, the National Bank of Australasia, not to be out done by the other banks, engaged the fashionable architect Lloyd Tayler to design its new headquarters in Collins Street, Melbourne. In the banking chamber, in one of the most exuberant displays, light from the dome sparkled on McEwan's elaborate cedar counters, tables and chairs with their extensive bronze castings provided by Daniel Livingstone.²

In 1875, at the Victorian Exhibition, McEwan foreshadowing that which he would supply under the Government House contract, exhibited a sideboard (8ft x 8ft x 2½ ft deep) in Richmond river cedar that incorporated 'some capital carved scroll-work masks, half figures, and a really fine head of Minerva' surmounted on a large mirror which forms the sideboard back and a model of the telescopic table for the State dining room.

On the opposite side of the hall is a fine side board, the work of Mr. James McEwan, of 361 Spencer street, West Melbourne, to whom the Government have entrusted a considerable portion of the work of furnishing the new Government house This particular article has not however, yet been devoted to that purpose, although it may be fairly considered worthy the destination. It is 8ft broad, 8ft high, and 2ft 6in deep. The material is Richmond River cedar, of fine quality, the workmanship is evidently finished, substantial, and convenient and the design is good. It is not elaborate, but it includes some capital carved scroll work masks, half figures, and a really fine head of Minerva. The last surmounts the large mirror which forms the back of the sideboard. Of internal conveniences the thing appears to contain no end. Mr. McEwan also exhibits a model, in mahogany and richly grained Richmond River cedar, of the 50ft mahogany telescope dining table which will be required for the state diningroom at Government house.³

The official catalogue describes the sideboard as: 'Eight-feet Sideboard, made of picked Richmond Cedar. The carving enrichments consist of nine carved figures, the carved ornament, on glass back, represents the head of Mianerva.' The 'magnificent sideboard at the late Exhibition was adjudged worthy of a place at Philadelphia' exhibition. Among the judges for the furniture section were William Wardell and Thomas Henry Thwaites.⁴

James McEwan and George Thwaites & Son were chosen by Wardell to furnish the principal rooms of new Government House on the Domain. McEwan was allotted:⁵

State dining room furnished with mahogany and Australian red cedar

Governor's dining room furnished with mahogany and Australian red cedar

Library furnished with mahogany and Australian red cedar

Lady Bowen's bedroom suite in Huon pine

After the Government House commission, McEwan was engaged to supply furniture to the wealthy citizens such as George Russell who purchased of a pair of cedar bookcases to sit either side of the fireplace in his library at *Golf Hill*.⁶

For reasons, not yet known, perhaps poor health, at the 1880 exhibition, in a series of four furnished apartments exhibited by the Wallach Brothers, one was occupied with exhibits of James McEwan, who was by then connected with their firm.

James McEwan died on 30 April 1883, his estate in deficit of £154 8s 11d.⁷

¹ PROV VPRS947, Unassisted Passenger Lists (1852-1923); Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Victoria, 1853-1888, Marriage Certificate 2320/1859, Death certificates 6027/1883, 7446/1873; PROV VPRS28/P0002, 11/174 Will and Probate of Alexander McKendrick; Dwyer, R, *La Trobe Journal*, no. 69, Autumn 2002, pp. 39-42; Fahy, K, Simpson, C, and A Simpson, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture*, David Ell Press, 1985, p. 157; Victorian Royal Commission on the Tariff, &c. 1883, pp. 1107-09; *Argus*, 8 December 1855, p. 8; 22 April 1856, p. 1; 30 May 1867, p. 7; *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 10 October 1873, p. 175

² *Argus*, 11 August 1870, p. 6

³ *Argus*, 3 September 1875, p. 1

⁴ Mueller, F., Castelnau, F., Hayter, H. H., Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition, & Centennial Exhibition. (1875). *Official record: containing introduction, catalogues, official awards of the Commissioners, reports and recommendations of the experts and essays and statistics on the social and economic resources of the Colony of Victoria*. Melbourne: Published by authority of the Commissioners, p528; *Wagga Wagga Express*, 22 April 1876, p. 7

⁵ La Nauze R, *Made to Order: George Thwaites and sons, colonial cabinet makers*, NewSouth Publishing, 2017. Pp. 242-243

⁶ Dwyer, R, *La Trobe Journal*, no. 69, Autumn 2002, pp. 39-42

⁷ PROV VPRS28/P0000, 27/085 Will and Probate of James McEwan