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Sir Alfred Stephen: Third Chief Justice of New South Wales, 1844-1873 (Lives of Australian Chief Justices)

J. M. Bennett

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Sir Alfred Stephen (1802-1894) was descended from generations of Stephens celebrated in England for their contributions to the law, literature, politics and public administration. A creature of the nineteenth century, Sir Alfred personified its values. Born at St Kitts, educated in England and there called to the Bar, he at first progressed so slowly that he decided to return to the colonies. As a pioneer Crown Law Officer in Tasmania he was ambitious, aggressive, and astonishingly successful financially. But, lacking tact, he fell out with the Lt-Governor and the judiciary. Taking another chance, he accepted a temporary judgeship at Sydney (1839), won immediate respect, and became Chief Justice (1844), serving with great accomplishment until 1873 - a term never equaled in New South Wales. He was first President of the Legislative Council after Responsible Government (1856), returning to the Council on resigning as Chief Justice. His many public services included being Lt-Governor; helping to establish The University of Sydney; and supporting such institutions as hospitals, museums and art galleries. Despite the difficulty, on a fixed income, of providing for his many children, he was great philanthropist. His name and works, now much forgotten, but of world renown in his day, are recalled in this biography by Dr John Michael Bennett, AM, whose project to write it was awarded the 2006 News South Wales History Fellowship. The NSW State Set of Lives of Australian Chief Justices, which includes, Sir Francis Forbes, Sir James Dowling, Sir Alfred Stephen and Sir James Martin is available for $160.00 - to order the NSW State Set, click here.

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