Biography

Peter Bourke (c.1840–1897)



Peter Bourke was an Irish-born soldier and prison warder whose life connected the military history of colonial New Zealand with the development of Victoria's prison system. Born in approximately 1840, reportedly in County Tipperary, Ireland, he eventually settled in Victoria, where he spent many years working at Pentridge Prison in Coburg.

During the 1860s, Bourke served in the New Zealand Wars and received the New Zealand War Medal. A surviving medal catalogue record held by the Auckland War Memorial Museum identifies a P. Bourke as a constable in the New Zealand Armed Constabulary. The record states that he was living in Melbourne when he applied for his medal. Newspaper accounts reportedly described Bourke surviving an attack in which nearly 20 of his fellow soldiers were killed, although the exact incident requires further verification.



New Zealand War Medal awarded to Peter Bourke. Image: Auckland War Memorial Museum

Following his service in New Zealand, Bourke reportedly joined the Victorian Permanent Artillery before beginning a new career as a warder at Pentridge Prison in 1871. He remained employed at the institution for approximately 26 years, serving prison system. According to surviving research notes, he was well respected by his fellow warders.

Bourke lived in Mary Street, Coburg, close to the prison where he worked. His family life was marked by tragedy in January 1894, when his seven-year-old son, Francis, drowned while catching crayfish near Bell Park railway station. The loss of his young son would have been a devastating event for the family, occurring only a few years before Bourke's own death.

Peter Bourke died on 4 June 1897, aged approximately 57. After a life that included military service overseas and more than two decades working within Victoria's prison system, he was buried at Coburg Cemetery, Roman Catholic Section A, Grave 748, in a family grave alongside several relatives.