SIR GEORGE'S BUST:

Some time ago Mr. Stan Gargett, for many years secretary of the Wollongong R.S.L. Sub-Branch, presented to the Museum, among other articles of local and military historical interest, a bust of General Sir George White, V.C.—a very fine piece of Victoriana, even if it has no local connection that we know of. Since it has been on display many members and visitors have asked who Sir George White was, and what was his claim to fame. Sic transit—for at the date inscribed on the back of the bust (24 February 1900) his was one of the most famous names in the British Empire, if not the world.

Sir George Stuart White was born at Whitehall, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, in 1835. He entered the army at 18, saw active service in the Indian Mutiny, in several North-West Frontier campaigns, and in Afghanistan and Burma, and was Commander-in-Chief in India from 1893 to 1897. With the Boer War imminent, he was sent in September 1899 to take command in Natal. As usual in Britain's wars, the force sent was too little and too late, and although White's troops could generally hold their own in stand-up fights, their highly mobile enemy repeatedly managed to work round the flanks and force a withdrawal. Finally White dug himself in at the important railway junction of Ladysmith and let the Boers besiege him. For this he was much criticised then and since, but he maintained that a further retreat would have entailed the abandonment of stores and ammunition as well as territory, and would have had a disastrous moral effect, whereas, once the Boers sat down to besiege him, the rest of Natal was preserved from invasion.

The siege of Ladysmith lasted for 118 days, mainly through the efforts of Sir Redvers Buller, the commander of the relief force, who staged a series of spectacular and, by pre-1914 standards, bloody disasters at Colenso, Spion Kop, and Vaalkranz before finally muddling through to relieve Ladysmith on 28 February 1900. By that time the besiegers were in any event anxiously looking over their shoulders; for other British forces (including the N.S.W. Lancers) under Lord Roberts had relieved Kimberley, had trapped General Cronje and most of his army at Paardeberg, and were on the point of invading the Orange Free State.

As a general White was less conspicuous for strategic and tactical ability than for courage and tenacity. Those qualities he manifested throughout the siege, particularly when Buller, temporarily plunged in despair after the Colenso debacle, heliographed a message advising the garrison to fire off their ammunition and surrender—a suggestion which White rejected with contempt.

White became Governor of Gibraltar and Field-Marshall, but held no more active commands until his death in 1912.

A close look at the bust will show that White is depicted wearing Highland dress. This may be because it was while serving as a major in the 92nd (Gordon) Highlanders that he won his V.C. in Afghanistan in 1879, when "in command of some 200 of the 92nd, he managed by skilful leading and great courage to outflank the Afghans in the Saug-i-Nawashtil gorge, clearing the way for the remainder of the force." General (afterwards Lord) Roberts referred to his "extreme personal gallantry." (What an Ulsterman was doing in the Gordons is not clear; but by that time the Highland regiments were no longer exclusively Highland—depopulation
was drying up the source of recruits—and, anyway, his mother was a Stuart).

An irrelevant footnote: a colour-sergeant of the Gordons so distinguished himself in the Afghan campaign that he was offered the choice of a V.C. or a commission. He took the commission. Probably no one—certainly no Australian—in World War II would have hesitated a moment before choosing the V.C.; but between officers and other ranks in the old regular army there was a great gulf difference, and it was easier to win a V.C. and live to tell the tale than to pass over it. —CORP’RIL WANST.

WOLLONGONG HIGH SCHOOL IN ITS EARLY YEARS:
(Continued from September Bulletin)

Although the school, once settled into its new home on Smith’s Hill, soon resolved itself into two amicable factions calling themselves the “cow cockies” and the “coalies” it could not be said that the attendance was largely drawn from these categories. In fact, over the period under review only three boys attended from farm families south of Kiama, the largest contingent of such coming from the Dapto and Yallah areas.

Similarly, although a proportion of boys and girls from north of Wollongong were children of coal miners, the largest group in any one category came from teachers’ families.

The eight students previously referred to as coming from the then exclusively farming, timber cutting and fishing district of Nowra hailed from the homes of a postmaster, jeweller, bank manager, newsagent, builder, tobacconist, coach proprietor and caterer; from these facts it can be deduced that although secondary education was open to any child able to pass the Qualifying Certificate examination there was a stratum below which few parents had the wish or money to permit their children to remain at school after the age of fourteen.

The curriculum ran to a set pattern of French and Latin, English and English History, Chemistry and Physics, Maths I and II, and the non-Latin classes had a choice in Geography, Sewing, Woodwork and Art.

Extra-curricular activities were practically nil. A camera club struggled on for a short time, and several end-of-term plays were staged based on the prescribed English reading for the year; however, on several occasions a “glee” club was organised whose activities lay in lunch-hour singing of wartime songs such as “Keep the home fires burning” and “Boys of the Dardanelles”; this was probably indicative of the general feeling of despair that the war would never end, most families had sons overseas and the casualty lists were long and grim. Music did not play any part otherwise in our timetable; it seemed sufficient that a smattering of tonic sol-fa in primary school catered for our musical knowledge.

Sport was limited; for the girls there was only hockey and we had no tennis court or cricket pitch; however, in cricket we had a team which frequently won against adult teams along the coast as well as against teams from city High Schools. In football we were only allowed to play soccer, by departmental ruling, and the lunch hour diversion of booting a ball around the playground produced in later years soccer stars such as Masters, Jarrett, Rhodes and Lyle. Then there was always the Friday afternoon swimming parade in summer to the old rock pool below Cliff Road.

(To be continued) —B. E. WESTON.