



Robert Downes

(Battye, J.S., *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, Vol.1, 1912, p.632)

Robert Henry Burnside Downes (1861-1925) was born 10 December 1861 either at Mauritius (*Cyclopedia of Western Australia* 1912) or at St Helena (obituary in *The Daily News* 1925), the son of British Royal Artillery officer Francis, and Helen Downes. Steadily advancing his rank through service in various overseas conflicts, Francis Downes eventually accepted a more secure appointment as commandant of the military forces in South Australia. In October 1877 Francis Downes was promoted lieutenant-colonel, and arrived in Adelaide, with Robert just sixteen years old. Robert had received his initial education at various schools in England, and passed the civil service examinations in South Australia in February 1878.

Downes was articled to hydraulic engineer Oswald Brown in Adelaide, obtaining experience in engineering, water supply & sewerage design for eight years, thence moving to the Victorian Railways Department. He assisted in railway surveys and in 1888 obtained the post of engineer and building surveyor at the Town of Hamilton in Victoria. He also entered into an architectural partnership, Hammond and Downes. From 1892-1895 he held a similar appointment at Geelong, before moving to the more prosperous opportunities offered at gold-boom Western Australia in 1895.

Robert joined the Public Works Department (PWD) at Perth in March 1895 as an engineering draftsman at a salary of £180 p.a., and demonstrating great skill was promoted to district engineer in 1896 at the much enhanced salary of £400. He appears to have been able to return to Victoria for a period, as on 4 April 1896 Downes married Mabel Cholmondeley Poynter at St Paul's Church,

Geelong. In 1905 he was district engineer at Day Dawn, drawing £480, but perhaps seeing greater opportunity, left the PWD to commence practice on his own account as an architect and engineer at Barrack Street, Perth. Downes was active in the West Australian Institute of Architects (WAIA), acting as a councilor in 1908-1910 and as treasurer in 1912.

Perhaps gaining connections through Mabel's father, who was with the National Bank of Australasia at Geelong, Downes designed numerous bank premises for the National Bank, including branches at Mingenew (50 Midlands Road), Williams (cnr Growse & Brooking Streets), Goomalling (cnr Railway Terrace & Hoddy Street), Northam (55 Fitzgerald Street), Bridgetown (97 Hampton Street), Kellerberrin (76 Massingham Street), and Dowerin (3 Stewart Street). Perhaps reflecting the strength of his surveying and engineering background, none of Downes' apparent works show great innovation or artistic flair – indeed he was often carefully organizing and administering the construction of standard template bank designs adapted to suit local conditions. Again demonstrating his engineering skills and varied professional background, in 1920 Downes assisted the Anglo-Persian Oil Co with the design of concrete foundations for two million gallon steel storage tanks, and of works sheds etc at Fremantle.

Mabel Downes died at Perth on 28 October 1919, aged just 45 years. Robert died at his home, 19 Ventnor Avenue, West Perth on 29 May 1925, aged 64 years. Downes had one sister and three brothers, of whom the much younger Rupert (1885-1945) was notable as a major-general and director-general of medical services in the Australian Military Forces.

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- 'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 21 September 1907, p.7 (National Bank of Aus Fremantle roof).
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- 'Tenders', *The West Australian*, 2 May 1908, p.4 (National Bank Northam).
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National Bank Mingenev (Google 2013)



National Bank Northam (Google 2013)



National Bank Goomalling (<http://www.mingor.net/localities/goomalling.htm>)



National Bank Kellerberrin (Google 2013)



Downes designed this Donnybrook stone war memorial of 1921, shown in its original position outside Canning Town Hall (Stephens, John, 'Community meaning and heritage of Western Australian war memorials', Fig.1 - with acknowledgement to Canning Districts Historical Society)