

Port Macquarie—The First Thirteen Years

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It gives me great pleasure to thank you for inviting me to address you this evening and for the honour the Hastings District Historical Society shares with me on this occasion, in presenting the first of the Catherine Jane Livingstone Memorial Lectures on the history of the North Coast of New South Wales and in this instance, of Port Macquarie. It was the fondest hope of your benefactress that those who pick up this gauntlet would prepare a chronicle of this wonderful part of our State for others to read in the future and say, as Alfred, Lord Tennyson said: 'so runs the round of life from hour to hour'.¹

I have entitled this paper 'The First Thirteen Years'. There is a reason for this, for in the thirteen years between 1818 and 1831 from the time of Port Macquarie's discovery until it became a free settlement, life in this penal settlement was a reflection of the early attempts to colonise a land with the employment of those who 'left their country for their country's good'.

Port Macquarie is not unknown to the Royal. As far as I can ascertain, one of your late councillors, Mr Frank Walker,² visited Port Macquarie in 1905. His search for the scattered threads of Australian history was the physical achievement of that year. He recalled in his address on the 23rd May that 'my visit was the outcome of a lengthy bicycle tour starting and finishing at Newcastle'. In our imagination we can share his journey of three hundred miles of uphill and down dale along a track that could hardly pass as a road. No better example can be produced of an historian made of the sterner stuff.

Eighty-seven years earlier, Surveyor John Oxley had found it even more exhausting to find a site for Port Macquarie. As the first European to make the journey from west to east, his journey was unique, as was his discovery. I would even venture to say that the

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history of Port Macquarie would never have been written as such, had not the circumstances at Mount Harris been different. It was on this monadnock, situated to the east of the Macquarie River and roughly north of the present town of Warren, that the written pages of Port Macquarie's history commenced.

A number of problems faced John Oxley during the latter days of June 1818. The Macquarie River was rising and his camp site on its banks was threatened while the mystery of the inland sea remained with him. To prepare for these he decided, as a safety measure, to establish a new camp on Mount Harris, some fifteen miles away.³ From there a party under his second in command, George Evans, would examine the difficulties which might have to be experienced on the early part of this journey to the north-east coast, while he, leading a party of four volunteers would proceed down the river by boat to investigate what he described as 'the obscurity in which the interest of this large country is still involved'.

Little did he realise how the effect of the weather would influence his conclusions. Rain over its watershed had swollen the Macquarie; for three days he was to follow the current of the river when to his astonishment 'it all at once alluded our pursuit by spreading on every point from northwest to northeast among the ocean of reeds which surrounded us and still running at the same rapidity as before'. Evans was to fare no better after 'an interesting but disagreeable journey',⁴ the report of which determined Oxley to proceed easterly to the Castlereagh, the river Evans and his party had discovered. But let us hold them a little longer at Mount Harris, this portion of the earth's crust which had been left in high relief from the surrounding plain, and share with them the confidence and respect they had for a careful leader.

July had ushered in foul weather with heavy rains and gales sweeping in on them from the north and southwest. They watched with relief, congratulating themselves that they were safe from danger as the water crept towards their tents as it covered the plain below and with time on their hands to imagine their fate had the decision to occupy Mount Harris been delayed only a few days.

Later on, September saw the expedition struggling eastwards over the New England tableland. Their physical difficulties were more evident to them than the order of succession of the sedimentary formations they had passed over. Their ascent of Mount Seaview on the 23rd of September 1818 brought them their first sight of the sea some forty-five miles away and below them the valley of the Hastings.⁵ This valley was a part of a subsidence that had followed an uplift during the earth's movements at the end of the carboniferous period. The limits of this subsidence extended as a part of what we know today as the Mid North Coast area—from the coast to the main tableland in the west and between the Macleay and Manning Rivers. It heralded the transgression of a shallow sea into which was

deposited a series of marine sediments known as the Lower Marine series. Into this, floating ice, derived probably from the glaciers of Tasmania and Victoria, when drifting northwards, dropped into these sediments their load of morainic material. Numerous and varied marine fauna inhabited this sea and in one area their remains were to collect in such abundance that they formed the Kundabung and Sherwood limestone deposits.⁶

During the permo-carboniferous period which followed, volcanic activity occurred on a considerable scale. From the Seaview region and from volcanic cones which stood as islands in the epicontinental sea immense lava flows poured upon the sea bed while their volcanic ash was distributed far and wide. The apparent permanent retreat of the sea at the close of the Lower Marine Epoch suggests that some important earth movement may have affected this region at that time.⁷

Oxley was the first to describe this land which stretched below him to the sea as 'broken into considerable forest hills and valleys — To the north the country was mountainous and broken beyond anything we had seen'.⁸ Their arrival at what is now known as Town Beach gave Oxley the opportunity to make a limited examination of the harbour he had called Port Macquarie. Previous to this, Captain Flinders had noted this entrance but having to stand off the coast had failed to discover if it had a navigable entrance. With this knowledge and his enthusiasm that his discovery could 'ultimately throw open the whole interior to the Macquarie River for the benefit of British settlers' he spent three days substantiating his claims. Disadvantaged by not having a boat at his disposal, he assumed that, although the bar at the river entrance was safe and narrow at low water it was capable of drawing three fathoms, sufficient for the type of shipping operating in the colony.

The plans which were to lead to the settlement of Port Macquarie Penal station must be understood within the light of the philosophy of the 1717 Statute of George I, which authorised transportation and the machinery to carry it out as punishment in lieu of branding and whipping and in cases of death sentences, transportation for life. The system became applicable to New South Wales in 1786, but the practice of selling the convicts as slaves on arrival at the place of transportation, as was the case in the American colonies, was never adopted.⁹ The Australian folk songs tell their story of transportation to the colony in its infancy. They tell of hardships endured, the reduced rations and the punishments which led to frightening and fearful tales filtering back to England; tales which made the fear of transportation a deterrent to crime.

In addition, we must consider the situation that existed in the colony which gave rise to Earl Bathurst's letter to Lord Sidmouth in 1817, thirty years later. Bathurst then was of the opinion that New South Wales was no longer capable as a penal settlement to satisfy the object for which it was originally intended.¹⁰ With hindsight,

we can surely agree with him and also agree that the situation that the convict class had evolved within the colony had a marked effect on the proposal to establish and maintain the Port Macquarie Settlement.

During Macquarie's government, the number of convicts transported amounted to more than nineteen thousand¹¹ from which rose problems of employment to regulate and control the large influx of those who had committed previous crimes of varying degrees. Until the Hyde Park Barracks and the Emu Plains Agricultural Farm complexes were established, the lack of accommodation had seen the transported convicts residing in scattered huts or houses in uncontrolled freedom. It was a situation that was to lead to further offences being committed by the more hardened types which led to their appearance before the Colonial Court for secondary imprisonment in already overcrowded gaols.¹²

In 1819, Oxley returned by sea with Lieutenant Phillip Parker King to study the practicability of the port he had named. It was to be the first serious attempt to survey a north coast river and for Oxley, a justification of his recommendation to the Governor.¹³

The initial soundings were taken at the bar entrance of the Hastings at the southern end of a 'Zeta' curve the sand beach makes between Point Plomer and Windmill Hill. These indicated that the presence of sand rollers, produced either by the strong running southerly current or by the prevailing north-east winds had effectively reduced the depth of water at the river entrance by some four fathoms compared with the offshore readings.¹⁴ The fact that both the 'Prince Regent' and the 'Mermaid' could safely negotiate the channel, notwithstanding the presence of a submerged rock, strengthened Oxley's contention that the harbour entrance was safe for vessels of a similar draft to those then employed.

At the close of 1819, Macquarie was prepared to listen to a proposition by Mr John Gyles to investigate the possibility of establishing a sugar growing industry in Port Macquarie. The prospectus Gyles prepared was, in Macquarie's opinion, ambitious and expensive and it did not satisfy an opinion he held that the area was not sufficiently tropical. Although he quickly passed the proposition over to Bathurst as a hot potato, he kept in the back of his mind some of Gyles's horticultural recommendations.

On the heels of Gyles's departure¹⁵ from Sydney, Bathurst's despatch gave Macquarie the all clear to establish a Penal Station at Port Macquarie, to be a place of banishment for those second offending convicts committed by the Colonial Court.¹⁶ It was with the most extraordinary haste that this proposition was proposed and determined upon. If such a proposition had been put into operation today after two surveys totalling less than a fortnight, its statistical incompleteness alone would throw present town planning authorities into a state of nervous confusion. However, the die was cast, and

Oxley returned to Port Macquarie to complete a third survey in company with Captain Francis Allman of the 48th Regiment.¹⁷

Allman was previously known to Macquarie as a member of the Court of Inquiry investigating the manner in which the 48th Regiment had conducted the running of a government windmill.¹⁸ The demeanour of this man must have impressed Macquarie, for he readily accepted Colonel Erskine's recommendation that Allman was a very steady and good officer and perfectly competent to carry out the task of establishing the new settlement.

The establishment of Port Macquarie in 1821 occurred at the time when Macquarie was already aware that he would shortly be leaving the colony. His critics had been many who had contended that his judgements had been ill-balanced and hasty but few could question the detail of his organisation in this instance. He saw that the expedition that Allman was to lead was fully equipped and its leader aware, through Oxley's charts, of the difficulties that may arise at the bar or in the harbour. In addition to equipment and stores, provisions included six months supply of salted meat for the personnel that comprised forty troops and sixty selected convict artificers and labourers.¹⁹

The voyage of the expedition was a veritable disaster. Having to run for shelter to Port Stephens and Trial Bay, the journey took twenty-three days longer than expected and reduced their food stock considerably. On entering the harbour, a series of disasters occurred. The *Prince Regent* and the *Mermaid* suffered slight damage which was to throw the programme further behind schedule. The final chapter to this unhappy beginning was the founding of the *Lady Nelson* when leaving. However, the wreck provided substitute parts for the *Prince Regent* which finally enabled her to get to sea to convey the news to a very concerned Macquarie and to report that the accidents had made serious inroads into the new settlement's food supply.²⁰

When Oxley arrived in the following June to investigate the cause of these mishaps, it was evident to him that these were the result of human error, of the impatience and anxiety to have the voyage ended by entering the harbour at the wrong tide. As a safeguard for the future, he saw that the channel buoys were fixed with shore signals established and directed the mate of the *Lady Nelson* to act as Pilot and Harbour Master.²¹

In carrying out Macquarie's instructions during 1821, particularly in regard to public works, Allman was able to present to Macquarie during his inspection, evidence that considerable progress had been made. Substantial weatherboard barracks had been constructed for the military officers, the troops and the civil officials. Three hundred convicts could be accommodated in weatherproofed bark huts, and due to their importance stood a provision store, a granary and a guard house all of weatherboard.

Macquarie's energies, during his visit in November 1821, were directed towards determining the location and planning of a future township, its facilities and its military barracks. His examination of land adjoining the Hastings River led to selection of Allmans Plains as the first Settlement Farm which was sufficient in area to contain the agricultural policy he had previously decided upon in his original instructions to Allman. He was able to see during the short period of his visit, the potential of the district. The sugar canes he had offered Allman were growing quite successfully, while pilot crops of tropical fruits and tobacco were being tested.

Pipe clay for a suitable brickyard capable of producing sandstock bricks had been chosen close to Wright's Creek and lime burning had commenced using the oyster shell beds that had been discovered at Limeburner's Creek and within the harbour. Importantly, timber cutting had commenced with sawpits prepared and production was such that timber was available as a return cargo to Sydney in the vessels bringing supplies to the settlement.²²

The administration of Sir Thomas Brisbane ushered in the penal conditions for the settlement of Port Macquarie and the implementation of the Report of the Commissioner of Enquiry, J. T. Bigge. Indulgences and spirituous liquors were not permitted to those who made up the first of the convict population. Irksome and fatiguing labour in felling timber and clearing the land was to be carried out by gangs under the control of an overseer.

It was part of Brisbane's policy to develop the practice of agriculture on government account as a remunerative government enterprise. Timber was a vital commodity in the growing colony and the land-clearing policy which was adopted in Port Macquarie was modified to conform with the general policy of land clearing for the free settlers, but in this situation was directed towards the establishment of government prison farms on a payable basis.²³ Consequently, two agriculturalists were appointed, a Superintendent of Agriculture and a Sugar planter employed under a three year contract to develop the sugar and tobacco industries. Under their direction, three farms were established at Settlement Farm, Sancroix and Redbank on the Hastings, and a plantation at Prospect at the junction of the Maria and Wilson Rivers. Here were planted the sugar canes from those grown from the original joints in the government garden, an area now occupied by Port Macquarie's new Court House.²⁴ This expansion was made possible by a considerable influx to the population by the number of convicts now arriving. This additional labour force enabled a public works programme to be commenced. A boat harbour adjacent to the signal station at Flagstaff was being excavated from the rock platform to provide a safe landing for stores and passengers should the harbour bar be found dangerous to enter. A building of logs with plastered interior walls had been constructed to be used as a female prison. Considerable expansion to the brick pits and yards had taken place to meet the demands

for bricks by the military establishment and in the construction of the Church of St Thomas. From the two hundred mechanics, tradesmen and craftsmen available in the settlement, sufficient labour was found to build and launch the *'Mary Elizabeth'* and the *'Regent Bird'* for the Colonial Fleet.

The discovery of Rollands Plains led to expansion of the agricultural programme. Samples of sugar and rum encouraged the Governor to furnish the means to produce two hundred tons of sugar and ten thousand gallons of rum. It was to lead to the establishment of two adjacent farms, one for grain the other for sugar. In line with the Governor's policy, the sugar plantations were equipped with a large brick building to serve as a store, a curing house and a separate boiling house together with a barn for curing tobacco.²⁵

Unfortunately, friction between the Commandants and the Superintendent of Agriculture centred around the authoritative powers of each. It was to lead to charge and counter-charge of bad management, crop damage, interference, overestimation, crop losses; excellent material for a local Court of Enquiry. Few of the officials of the settlement escaped criticism and censure. The Commissioners found irregularities in tendering, in the assignment of servants and the indulgences arising from the ownership of livestock. Port Macquarie must have spawned the infamous term 'foreign order', a serious problem even associated with industry today. All types of articles ranging from brass spurs to furniture of cedar and rosewood and even boats were made for the military and civil officers at the government's expense.

The Commissioners concluded that the general conduct of the settlement was due to the Commandant's failing to understand and imbue into those incarcerated in the settlement a sense of fear and trepidation. As a solution they recommended a system of 'Spade Husbandry' in less extensive areas as a method suitable for manual labour and surveillance.

The recommendations of the Committee of Enquiry certainly appealed to Governor Darling – a hardening of discipline to improve the prevailing inefficiency of the number of prisoners and others widely spread throughout the district. It tempered his own opinion that every prisoner in the penal settlement should be worked in irons. The Enquiry was to lead to change. There was a hardening of discipline. Sugar cane cultivation virtually ceased while the Agricultural Establishment continued to produce maize and wheat after the dismissal of the agriculturalist. It led to reductions in the numbers of prisoners by transfer to Norfolk Island until only 176 were left in 1830 to witness the official end of the settlement.

Although fully aware that Governor Brisbane's recommendation to Earl Bathurst was to close the settlement and it was in his hands to do so, Governor Darling first sought to have a survey of the Hastings River District conducted before he opened the area to free

settlement. The survey was to trace the watercourses entering the Hastings, to form parochial boundaries, to locate and map the mountain chains, the hills, valleys and river plains that formed the basin of the Hastings and its tributaries. It was to reserve portions of the land for settlers, church and school estates, government purposes and townships.²⁷

The plan for the Free Settlement which was to follow the closure of the Penal Station disclosed a number of points for consideration. The disposal of prisoners entailed the removal of the capital respites and some of those serving life sentences to Norfolk Island. It was expected that all the remaining prisoners would be available for assignment to the future settlers.

Of the agricultural establishments which were more or less in a state of cultivation, it was agreed to leave either Settlement Farm or the Ballangarra Farm in the government's hands for the employment of convicts should the necessity arise. All the others were to be leased for a period of five years. The disposal of the government buildings provided for an Inn in a 'house of a tolerably good description' and in another inferior one 'a Public House'. Of the remainder that became vacant, they were to be let on a yearly basis. The civil establishment by necessity was reduced in proportion to the number of prisoners sent away although the Commissariat and the Department of Works were to continue. The end of the military presence was forecast to take place a few months after the settlement was opened or when a dozen or a score of settlers had taken up their properties. It was all routine, a tidying up before the Proclamation, which was published in the *Gazette* on 13 August 1830.²⁸

Today, we can question the extravagance of the Crown Land grants which took place in the arable area of a river basin as small as the Hastings. Of the types of Crown grants, one by purchase and another without purchase and those which offered military and naval officers special advantages; the result led to some holdings being as large as nearly four thousand acres, held either by absentee landlords making token use of the land's potential or by those depending on a cheap labour source – the assigned convict – to make their properties viable.²⁹

We may ask ourselves, why was it so? One explanation could be that it was the colony's version of the English Enclosures Act which enabled enormous amounts of common and open land to be enclosed by individuals and others. The English Act saw more money expended on land, more improvements introduced and the enclosed land made more productive. Even so, the cost was great; in many parts of England it saw the disappearance of the yeoman class and the small farmers, and in the Hastings Valley it has all been repeated, even to the disappearance of its own primitive farming class – the aborigine.

The years of the 'bakers dozen' had past. Autonomous rule by the military commandments was at last to be superseded by civil authority administered by a resident magistrate.³⁰ Social progress was knocking at the door, a door which opened up the records of this settlement which, in the main, had suffered less from the moral and physical degradation the other penal stations had suffered when discipline was unrestrained.

Using the expression the Romans used – 'vos non vobis', literally translated as 'the work of which the credit falls to another rather than the doer', I bring this address to a close.

Its preparation was made all the more easy for me by having the use of the material that members of the Society's Records and Research section have collected over the last thirty years. It allowed me to meander in my fashion and add other sources to complete my story.

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