

COLONIAL NSW IN THE 1820s TO THE 1840s AND ANNABELLA BOSWELL

Roslyn Russell

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The convict system

In February 1822 Governor Lachlan Macquarie left the colony of NSW after a 12-year period of administration. The ramshackle streets of Sydney had been tidied up, and substantial buildings in the Colonial Georgian style now created an ordered ambience in the growing urban area. The Blue Mountains had been crossed in 1813, and settlement was spreading out from the central node of Sydney, to the west, north and south. By the mid-1820s a mixed society of free settlers, freed convicts and their children, and those still under a sentence of servitude were engaged in developing a thriving colonial economy.

I don't want to dwell on the convict system here, but it is important to understand its nature, as it underpinned the growing prosperity of the Australian colonies which, in its turn, allowed a more cultivated and diverse society to flourish. While I intend to talk about aspects of that cultivated society – and by a not-so-tortuous process involve a mention or two of Dickens – a brief word on how the convict system



operated for over 60 years in NSW is in order. Historians have developed the analogy of the convict system as ‘a stairway on which the individual could move either upwards or downwards’. A convict’s position varied with behaviour, and how he or she dealt with the roles they were given by the system. When a convict arrived from the British Isles he or she could either be kept in government service, or ‘assigned’ to work for a private landholder. If she or he behaved well a ‘ticket of leave’, a limited form of freedom restricting residence to a defined area, could be granted. The next

step from this, after further good behaviour, was a ‘conditional pardon’. This could be granted on condition that the convict never returned to the British Isles: this is what Magwitch in *Great Expectations* would have been given. An ‘absolute pardon’ could be granted to a few individuals, or their sentences could expire. These were all steps on the way up and out of convict servitude. There were also steps that took a convict downward:



for bad behaviour he might become part of a labour gang on public works such as road building. More bad behaviour could be punished by the convict being placed in an ‘iron gang’, where he was forced to work while wearing chains fastened to both ankles and waist. Recalcitrant women could be sent to the Female Factory at Parramatta, where they carried out work such as picking oakum, laundry, and other mass domestic tasks. If these forms of punishment were unsuccessful in modifying behaviour the convict could be sent to a special penal settlement

whose remoteness and conditions were calculated to make life as unpleasant as possible. The last line of resort was the death sentence, for which the gallows always stood prepared. [This paragraph has been adapted by Graham Connah and a diagram by James Semple Kerr in a chapter entitled ‘The convict contribution: vestiges of the penal system’. in Graham Connah, *The Archaeology of Australia’s History*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 51-52.]

The career of convict artist Joseph Backler illustrates how the convict system I described earlier operated at the individual level. He arrived in Australia in 1832 to serve a life sentence for ‘passing forged orders’. He was 18 years old. By 1834 he was in Port Macquarie serving his sentence as a ‘special convict’ – that is, he was educated and specialised in painting on glass. While in Port Macquarie he painted scenes of the port itself and of prosperous looking people and their carriages gathered outside St Thomas’s Church, and in May 1842 he married an Irish convict, Margaret Magner, at St Thomas’ Church. A year later he received his ticket of leave, which was transferred from Port Macquarie to Sydney, where he was able to develop a professional career as an artist. Over 100 of his portraits and landscapes have survived and are in the Mitchell Library. He died in Sydney in 1895.

The majority of transported felons at least began their period of servitude as assigned servants, and it is this fact that leads to the relevance of the discussion of the convict system to this discussion of colonial society in NSW, especially in relation to the origins of colonial wealth. There were fortunes to be made in NSW if you could stake out a land claim, and have the means to apply for convicts to help you to work it. Those to whom convicts were assigned had to make themselves responsible for their food and lodging, but all profits from the results of their labour accrued to the landholder. And there were undoubtedly many people who profited immensely from the system, and laid the foundations for colonial fortunes such as that of Alexander Berry who created Coolangatta Estate, where this conference is being held.

What sort of society did this create? Two observers who arrived in NSW from England in the mid- to late-1830s gave their verdicts. The first was Charles Darwin, who landed in Sydney from HMS *Beagle* on 12 January 1836:

‘At last we anchored within Sydney Cove, we found the little basin, containing many large ships & surrounded by Warehouses. In the evening I walked through the town & returned full of admiration at the whole scene. – It is a most magnificent testimony to the power of the British nation ... My first feeling was to congratulate myself that I was an Englishman.’ [Charles Darwin, *Beagle* Diary, 29 January 1836]

A fortnight later he was beginning to have second thoughts:

‘On the whole ... I was disappointed in the state of Society. – The whole community is rancorously divided into parties on almost every subject. Amongst those who from their station of life ought to rank with the best, many live in such open profligacy, that respectable people cannot associate with them. There is much jealousy between the children of the rich emancipist & the free settlers, the former being pleased to consider honest men as interlopers.

The whole population poor & rich are bent on acquiring wealth; the subject of wool and sheep grazing amongst the higher orders is of preponderant interest. The very low ebb of literature is strongly marked by the emptiness of the booksellers shops; these are inferior to the shops of the smaller country towns of England ... The balance of my opinion is such, that nothing but rather severe necessity should compel me to emigrate.’ [Charles Darwin, *Beagle* Diary, 14 March 1836]

And when Darwin left Australia in mid-March 1836, he delivered a negative parting shot:

‘Farewell Australia, you are a rising infant & doubtless some day will reign a great princess in the South; but you are too great & ambitious for affection, yet not great enough for respect; I leave your shores without sorrow or regret.’ [Charles Darwin, *Beagle* Diary, 4 January 1839]

Elizabeth Gould, wife and artistic collaborator of the celebrated 19th century ornithologist, John Gould, who visited Australia from 1838 to 1839, echoed Darwin’s accusation that money-making consumed most of the attention of the people she met in colonial NSW:

‘The fact is that most persons come here with a determination to get money and return to England as soon as they can ... This has been a famous place for money making – and I think money spending.’ [Letter from Elizabeth Gould to Mrs Mitchell, 4 January 1839]

The Macleays – a family of educated women

Alexander Macleay had emigrated with his wife Eliza and six daughters to Australia, arriving here in January 1826. Two sons remained at school in England. Macleay’s appointment as Colonial Secretary of NSW, as well as providing the salary necessary to maintain his family’s middle-class lifestyle, also gave him the opportunity to pursue his scientific passions: botany, entomology and zoology. As Colonial Secretary, Macleay (and by extension his family) joined an elite social circle in the growing colony, centred on Government House. Macleay soon set about creating another circle: that of people with scientific passions similar to his own. Secretary of the Linnean Society in London from 1798 to 1825, and a Fellow of the Royal Society, Macleay expanded his already considerable range of scientific interests into ornithology, and began to make the case for developing ‘the basic institutions needed to support a scientific community’ – a colonial museum, botanic gardens and public library. All his demands were eventually met. The Australian Museum began as a tiny room in his Colonial Secretary’s office. The lead he gave soon gathered to the family a circle of like-minded colonists.’ [Elizabeth Windshuttle, *Taste and Science: the women of the Macleay family, 1790-1850*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 1988, p65.]

The Macleay daughters enjoyed a broader education than most of their peers, as Elizabeth Windshuttle describes in her book on the women of the Macleay family. She recorded that:

‘In the Macleay household the girls studied not only botany, but entomology, zoology, ornithology, marine biology, conchology, paleontology, astronomy, horticulture and landscape gardening. This

placed them apart from all other women, and from most other men, since these sciences were rarely taught at the time at school or university.’ [Elizabeth Windshuttle, *Taste and Science: the women of the Macleay family, 1790-1850*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 1988, p40.]

Central to this side of the girls’ education was the library which, after the natural history collection, was the most prized feature of the Macleay household. Frustrated by the inferior educational standards of home tutors for the girls, Alexander Macleay subscribed to Cawthorns Library to supplement the rich stores of the household library. When the Macleay library was sold in 1845 to pay creditors it had grown to 4000 volumes. Its contents were remarkably wide-ranging and reveal that, at least in this family, Tory politics and Evangelical religion cohabited with progressive thought and catholic tastes. The list of contents provides a rare insight into one of the first family of intellectuals in the colony of New South Wales and the interests of pre-eminent natural scientists of the day.’ Windschuttle lists the contents categories: ‘History, Biography, Natural History, Botany, Mineralogy and Geology, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts, Fine Arts and Antiquities, Agriculture, Geography and Topography, Voyages and Travel, Divinity, Education, Belles Lettres, Moral Philosophy, Political Economy, Essays Novels Romances etc. Poetry, Drama, Magazines etc. Atlases and Portfolios.’

It is now time to leave the mother settlement of Sydney, and head up the coast to a newer location of European settlement that also began its life as a penal station – Port Macquarie. On 17 April 1821 a convict settlement was established at Port Macquarie, led by three boats under command of Captain Francis Allman of the 48th Regiment. On 20 November 1826: Archibald Clunes Innes arrived to administer convict settlement as Commandant, but left in April 1827 when recalled to Sydney for indifferent performance. At this point Port Macquarie’s life as a formal penal settlement had less than three years to run: the convict station was closed in 1830 and the area opened up to free settlement. This of course did not mean that there would be no convicts in Port Macquarie: those that were there would be assigned servants, not incarcerated within a convict barracks.

Archibald Innes and Lake Innes House

Archibald Clunes Innes became for a number of years a successful entrepreneur in the Port Macquarie district. As a former Commandant of the penal settlement there, he had foreseen the region’s potential as a gateway to the New England region. Archibald Innes married Margaret

Macleay, one of Alexander Macleay's daughters, in 1829, and on 27 August that year he applied for a grant of 2560 acres in the Port Macquarie area. When Port Macquarie was opened up to private settlement from 13 August 1830 Innes was one of the first to take up his land grant on what was called 'Burrawan' by the local Birpai people, but which Innes promptly renamed 'Lake Innes'. He amassed a number of land grants in the region and in the New England area (the town of Glen Innes is named after him), and for a while made a tidy profit supplying agricultural products to the various commissariats in the region.



The construction of Lake Innes House and Estate by convict labour began in 1830-31 and was completed in 1839. The

Estate had a farm village and a vineyard, bricks were made on the Estate for the various construction projects, and the 'stately home' that was Lake Innes House was the last word in colonial luxury – it even boasted a flushing toilet with a Wedgwood blue-and-white-transfer ware bowl; and an 'Old Master' painting that was attributed by one guest to the Italian Renaissance artist Paolo Veronese (it wasn't actually by Paolo, but has been identified as probably the work of one of his sons). The large and luxuriously fitted stables held horses that were lent to Innes's guests who, if they were single males, had their own accommodation in what was called 'Bachelors' Hall'. Lake Innes House also held a fine library. Archibald Innes's niece Annabella (Innes) Boswell would later describe



the layout of Lake Innes House in her journal:

'I have by me a rough plan of the house and grounds, stables and outbuildings, which gives some idea of their size and extent. There was a wide double veranda to the front of the house, which faced the Lake and the setting sun. A veranda extended along the whole of the south

side. The drawing room was a large square room at the corner, 20 ft by 24 ft, with two French windows to the west, and two to the south, opening on to the veranda...’

Annabella Boswell and Lake Innes House

Annabella Boswell (née Innes), was born on 16 September 1826 at Yarrows, on the Bathurst Plains, the eldest daughter of landholder George Innes and his wife Georgianna neé Campbell. [Ngairre M Souter (1967) ‘Boswell, Annabella Alexandria Campbell (1826-1914), Australian Dictionary of Biography online edition, and, publication note in Morton Herman (ed) (1965/1987) *Annabella Boswell’s Journal*: xvii-xix] The Innes family had settled on *Yarrows*, one of the first land grants in the district, in 1823. The family moved north to *Glen Alice*, a cattle property at Capertee, in 1834. Annabella was educated at Mrs Evans’ boarding school in Sydney and by governesses on *Glen Alice*. In 1839 the family moved again, this time to Port Macquarie where her uncle Archibald Innes had substantial landholdings. George died a short time after and the family moved back south, sold up *Glen Alice* and, after two years at Parramatta resettled at Port Macquarie in 1843. Annabella visited many parts of the colony including Bathurst, Sydney, Liverpool, Capertee, South Creek, Parramatta, Newcastle and Port Macquarie. Her diaries are most detailed in their portrayal of Port Macquarie where they contain a wealth of information about everyday for the ‘genteel occupants’ of this ‘rough, harsh land’. [Morton Herman (ed) (1965/1987) *Annabella Boswell’s Journal*: x-xi] Later in life she compiled extracts from her youthful journal into a publication, *Annabella Boswell’s Journal*.

Annabella Innes, as she was when she first penned her journal from the age of 12, was connected by marriage and social networks to the emergent intellectual and cultural milieu of colonial NSW in the 1830s and 1840s. By disposition and education Annabella possessed a strong spirit of inquiry, which can only have been enhanced by living among members of the Macleay family of scientific collectors and botanical artists, and meeting others on a regular basis.

Annabella Innes had encountered the intellectual environment of the Macleay family well before she lived at Lake Innes House. In 1834 she had gone to school in Bridge Street, Sydney, and out of school time ‘made many happy visits to our kind friends Mr and Mrs Macleay at Macquarie Place ... Miss Macleay, afterwards Mrs Harrington [*sic*], was very kind to me.’ Miss Macleay was Frances Leonora (Fanny) Macleay, herself an extremely capable natural history artist with wide-ranging scientific

interests. [Windshuttle writes of Fanny Macleay: 'Fanny's intellectual interest in natural history was unusual for a woman of the period. Few women had a knowledge of these subjects and fewer still engaged in such a wide range of fields. Most women of the time limited their interest in studying nature to botany and horticulture and confined their activities to collecting and drawing plants, pressing flowers and collecting shells. Fanny pursued these normal activities but added the new scientific fields of the period to her interests: entomology, zoology, ornithology, palaeontology, mineralogy, astronomy and landscape gardening ... While the other sisters studied botanical drawing and painting and collected seeds, none were as absorbed in natural history as Fanny. Hence many of the tasks involved in maintaining their father's collections fell to her. She was his main assistant in his research and in collecting specimens in both England and New South Wales.' (p48)]

She obviously appreciated Annabella's lively intelligence, as the latter reported, 'I have since heard that she wished to adopt me and educate me herself.' [*Annabella Boswell's Journal: an account of early Port Macquarie*, edited by Morton Herman, first published Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, this edition Angus and Robertson, 1981, p3. Sadly, Fanny Macleay died in 1836 at the age of 43, six weeks after she married Thomas Harrington, her father's assistant as Colonial Secretary.]

At Easter that year the overflowing Tank Stream flooded the house where Annabella was living; but 'next day I was sent for by Mrs Macleay, and spent in her house one of the happiest times of my young life: all were so kind and clever, and all their surroundings were so refined and luxurious in comparison to anything I, who had lived mostly in the bush, was accustomed to.' [*Annabella Boswell's Journal: an account of early Port Macquarie*, edited by Morton Herman, first published Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, this edition Angus and Robertson, 1981, p4]

Nine years later when, as a teenager, Annabella Innes went to live at Lake Innes House, she again came under the Macleay family's intellectual influence. Her aunt, Margaret (Macleay) Innes, became also her teacher. Margaret Innes, in line with the family ethos, established a good library and, in order to ensure that her own children and nieces were provided with a decent education, supervised their learning herself, as Annabella recalled in later life:

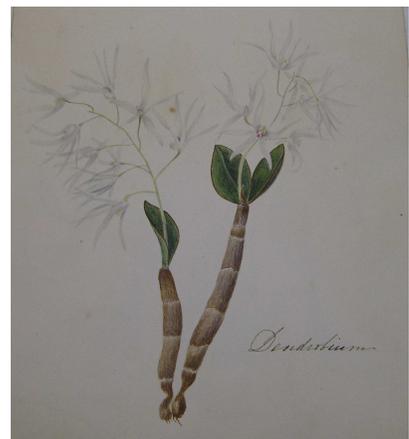
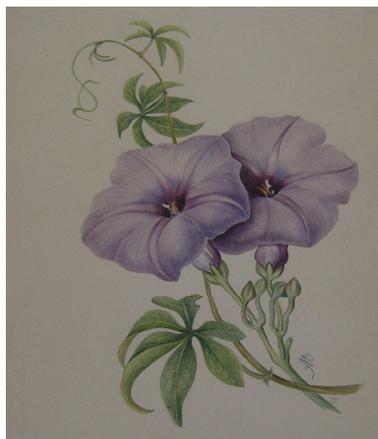


'She carried on the schoolroom work admirably, and allowed no trifling or idle moments. How she managed to devote the morning so entirely to us, having so many other claims on her attention, is now a mystery to me. We flew to the schoolroom at ten o'clock from the breakfast table; she followed in half an hour and remained till one o'clock.

We at once read together the Psalms of the day, said texts, Collects, a hymn or portion of Scripture; then followed quickly our various lessons, which we had prepared before breakfast or the previous evening; then we did sums for half an hour ... after that we wrote to dictation, our interest in this never flagging, and our anxiety about our mis-spells was never-failing. [Annabella Boswell's Journal: an account of early Port Macquarie, edited by Morton Herman, first published Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, this edition Angus and Robertson, 1981, p53]

Annabella also took an educated interest in the natural world. When a comet appeared in the sky for a fortnight in March 1843 she recorded its appearance meticulously in her Journal; and she and her cousin Dido set themselves a target for painting wildflowers gathered in the area, as Annabella recorded:

‘About this time some of my former love of drawing began to revive, and Dido and I resolved to paint at least one wildflower every week ... We collected flowers and berries of every description.’ [Annabella Boswell's Journal, November 1843]



Annabella also gave graphic descriptions of some of the lavish social occasions at Lake Innes House, in particular a grand banquet held on the

occasion of Margaret Innes's father Alexander Macleay's visit for an election, 22 June 1843:

'The table presented a splendid appearance, being laid very handsomely for eighteen persons. The epergne was quite beautiful, and when placed in the centre of the table the flowers were as high as the lamp. I must own I was rather glad when it was removed. There were two silver wine coolers with light wines, and branch candlesticks with wax candles, and four silver side dishes: we had two soups and an immense variety of dishes. Bruce [the piper] and the butler waited, and we had four footmen in livery. I felt quite dazzled, as I had never been at so splendid an entertainment before.'

Dickens at Lake Innes House

Despite Darwin's disparagement of Australians' book-buying culture, Dickens's works were widely circulated in the Australian colonies, and enthusiastically received. In 1938 the *Pickwick Papers* were published in a pirated edition in Tasmania that sold 30,000 copies in the Australian colonies. Pickwick mania took other forms: a Christmas party with a Pickwickian theme was held on Kangaroo Island. And Dickens' other works were just as eagerly seized upon and read. When Dickens died in 1870 his death was mourned in Australia as if he were a national hero. [Roslyn Russell, *Literary Links*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, p.39]

Annabella and her extended family at Lake Innes House were among the many Australians who eagerly read the latest novels by Dickens. She recorded a couple of occasions on which the family gathered to hear his works read aloud:

'During my uncle's absence we have dined early, and, having the house to ourselves, have sat in the veranda near the library, which is always shaded and cool. One of party reads aloud while the others work. Our book is *The Old Curiosity Shop*. We are deeply interested in Little Nell, and enjoy it doubly when my aunt reads.' [Annabella Boswell's Journal, 18 December 1844]

'Mr Smith has been reading aloud to us every evening from after tea till ten o'clock, and has finished *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It is just the book for reading aloud, and he reads very well. I think even the author would say he had done it justice. We have had some fun appropriating characters from it. Margaret is Mercy, I am Charity, Dido is Miss Todgers, and

patronises Mr Smith, who is pronounced by all to be her ‘youngest young man (no doubt).’ [Annabella Boswell’s Journal, 31 August 1847]

End of an era at Lake Innes House

The luxurious and genteel life led by the Innes family at Lake Innes House was not to last, as Archibald Innes plunged deeper and deeper into debt during the 1840s. The winding back of the convict system of fixed penal settlements meant that supplying the commissariat was no longer a lucrative option for a man who was by nature extravagant and unable to live within his means. Annabella graphically captures the mood of impending economic depression in her Journal: “Bad times” is at present the too general subject of conversation; everyone takes an interest in it, and it is melancholy to hear of the number of people who are absolutely in want of the necessaries of life, who lately were in affluence. No one seems to have an idea as to how it will all end.’ (75)

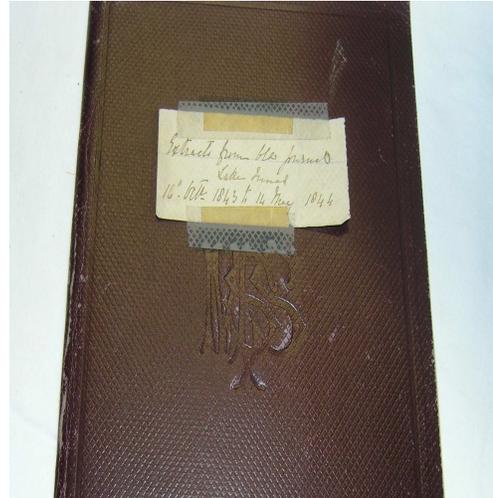


These forebodings were correct. Archibald Innes’s business ventures, such as a road to New England to bring produce from the hinterland to Port Macquarie, failed; as did his shipping interests. The ending of assignment of convict servants in 1838 meant that he struggled to keep the reduced staff he employed. The severe economic depression of the 1840s brought an end to Innes’s career as an independent businessman, and he became a gold commissioner and police magistrate at Hanging Rock, then moved to Newcastle, where he died on 29 August 1857. He was buried in the grounds of Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle. Margaret Innes died at Lake Innes House on 6 September 1858. Lake Innes House nevertheless remained in Innes family hands until it was leased out by the Innes’ heir, Gustavus, then passed to a series of owners until, in 1905, a bushfire swept the property. It was prey to vandals and fell into ruin, and in 1987 came under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW. The site, for many years surrendered to the encroaching bush, was cleared of invasive vegetation. Archaeological excavation was carried out in the

1990s, and the site was stabilised. It can now be visited on guided tours conducted by the National Parks and Wildlife Service NSW.

Annabella Boswell's Journal

Annabella married Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell (1816-92) at Newcastle in June 1856, and the couple had one son and three daughters. Boswell was employed in the Bank of New South Wales as an accountant, later (1858) rising to the position of manager. In 1864 the Boswells travelled to Scotland from where, after inheriting the family estate, *Garrallan*, Patrick resigned from the bank in 1865. Annabella died at *Garrallan* on 25 October 1914. Annabella Boswell's journal was first published in Scotland late in the 19th century as *Early Reminiscences and*



Gleanings from an Old Journal. A copy somehow found its way to the Port Macquarie Bank of New South Wales and was acquired by the Hastings River Historical Society in 1956. Richard Ratcliffe was able to purchase original drawings and watercolours plus a transcribed version of the original diary and a number of other items from a member of the Boswell family. It was republished by Angus and Robertson in 1965, and again in the 1980s, and brought to a wider audience the only journal written in colonial NSW by an intelligent and well-educated teenage girl.

