HENRY KENDALL IN ILLAWARRA

Thomas Henry Kendall, "Native Australian Poet," was born on 18 April, 1839, in Ulladulla, on the South Coast of New South Wales, the twin son of Basil Kendall and his wife Melinda, nee McNally. Basil was the son of Thomas Kendall, who came to Sydney in 1809 and five years later went as a missionary to New Zealand. In 1826 Thomas returned to Australia and obtained a grant of land at Ulladulla where he entered the timber trade. In 1832 a survey party, including Thomas Kendall and his son-in-law, Mr. Florence, left Ulladulla in the "Brisbane" for Sydney. The cutter foundered off Jervis Bay and all hands were lost.

Basil Kendall, Henry's father, was spoken of as being bright and amiable, but unstable. Alexander Sutherland describes him as a mild gentlemanly man of evident education and refinement but thin and delicate, one lung almost gone through the ravages of consumption. It was said that one evening at a dance in Sussex Street, Basil met the bright and pretty Melinda Anne McNally. Overcome, he proposed to her on the spot and they were married the next morning. As both were rumoured to be of intemperate habits this may well have been so! Melinda McNally was the grand-daughter of Leonard McNally, a leading Irish wit and barrister who turned informer on his fellow United Irishmen and for his pains was disgraced and made almost penniless by an ungrateful British Government. One of his sons, Patrick, came to Australia and it was his daughter whom Basil Kendall so precipitately married.

Basil and Melinda Kendall settled on Thomas Kendall's grant, Kirmington, at Ulladulla where their twin sons Basil Edward and Thomas Henry were born in 1839. Their habitation was poor and their belongings were meagre; however, the mountains and creeks, the ferns and the mosses instilled in the infant Henry a love of Nature which stayed with him all his life.

4. Ibid.
5. As he wrote in a letter to J. Brunton Stephens, 5 June, 1880 "I am simply a man of the woods. I was born in the forests and the mountains were my sponsors. Hence I am saturated with the familiar spirit of Australian scenery and in painting that scenery perhaps I excel."
6. After a few years the Kendalls moved to Grafton, where Basil Kendall eventually died in 1852. The family separated, and Mrs. Kendall and her two sons went to live with her father, Patrick McNally, at Fairy Meadow near Wollongong. At that time Melinda Kendall's eldest brother William and sister Mary, the wife of James Martin, held adjoining 50-acre grants at the foot of Broker's Nose, William's grant extending almost to the slope of the mountain. Mary later transferred her grant to her husband, who sold it and immediately absconded with the money.
Fairy Meadow was largely unsettled, and Henry and his brother were free to play in the lush green fields and “walk side-by-side on the lovely shores of Wollongong.”

According to various accounts, Henry did not receive formal schooling but being of a nervous and delicate disposition was allowed to remain at home where he was tutored by his mother. Patrick McNally was a hard taskmaster and the story goes that one day he thrashed his grandson with a stick for not minding his sheep efficiently. “From my eleventh to my fifteenth year” wrote Kendall afterwards, “I have been following sheep: illiterate and friendless indeed.”

8. “Wollongong” poem by H. Kendall, First Published “S.M.H.” 16 May, 1861.

One of the poet’s earliest companions was George Millard, one time editor of the Milton Times. He accompanied Henry and his brother to Sunday School in the first Church of England Sunday School Hall in Market Street. According to Millard, Henry had come to the notice of Thomas Garrett, M.P., founder of the “Illawarra Mercury,” who was said to have helped him to get his verses published in local newspapers of the time.

Millard described Henry as a “very agreeable and interesting companion, exceedingly good natured and amiable, very fond of legends and whatever was wonderful and a bit of naturalist, being intensely interested in any living thing but at times odd in his tastes for almost all sorts of living creatures.”

In his early teens, Henry was employed by a Mr. Bates in his store at Fairy Meadow to carry parcels around to his customers and it was during this time that his early efforts at poetry are said to have been published. No evidence can be found to support this, unfortunately.

In 1855 the family’s circumstances necessitated that Henry join his Uncle Joseph’s whaler the “Pluristead” for two years as cabin boy. On his return he rented a house for his mother, brother and three sisters at Newtown, Sydney, thus leaving his grandfather’s farm for good.

10. Grey, Mrs. A. M. Hamilton op. cit Page 141.
11. op. cit Page 156.
12. op. cit Page 159.

See also reference to missing issues of “Illawarra Mercury” in Aims and Objectives, Conclusions.

(To be continued)
HENRY KENDALL IN ILLAWARRA
(Continued from April Bulletin)

From his teens, Henry Kendall wrote verses, the first authenticated publication being in 1859. He contributed verses regularly to the “Empire” from 1859 to 1862 when his friend, J. Sheridan Moore, sponsored the publication of his “Poems and Songs” (Sydney, Clarke. 1862).

The work included a number of poems recalling his boyhood on the South Coast, and the images of mountain and sea scapes that remained in his memory. From the verses, it seems at times that he wrote while revisiting his old haunts. For example, in “Wollongong” he says “Let me talk of years evanished, let me harp upon the time when we trod these sands together, in our boyhood’s golden prime.” Although retrospective, the poem has a sense of the present about it.

Another of his verses “Kiama” was one of the poems published in the “Athenaeum” (London), which brought Henry Kendall to the notice of the English and Australian public. The editor wrote “From a new country will come in time a new literature. Those images of a virgin nature found in the sky and landscape in the flora and fauna of Australia must one day speak to the true poet and find utterance in his song.” This forecast proved true.

“Kendall’s great ambition was to be a ‘Native Australian Poet’ and from the first his poetry shows a deliberate and conscious attempt to reflect his Australian environment, especially the landscapes of the South Coast, with its creeks and waterfalls, ferns and moss, its lyre birds and forest flowers.” 13

Although the verses in his early work are not as important or impressive as those of his later volumes, yet they must remain as vivid documentaries of the area. Just as a painter is important historically before the advent of the camera, so too can the poet reveal melodically the beauties of the world about him. Kendall provides a vivid, cultural and social documentary record of the people he met — the shingle splitters, the bullock drivers and cattle hunters, through his verse.

He also attempted to present the life of the Aborigines, as evidenced in his early poems “Koroora,” ”Urama” and “Ulmarra.” No doubt the young Kendall came into contact with the numerous aborigines living in the area at that time, and their death songs and laments are interesting evidence of this.

A further reference to Henry Kendall living in Illawarra is found in James Jervis’ “Illawarra, a Century of History, 1788-1888,” 14 which states that in 1860 Kendall was serving in Mr. Allan’s store at Jamberoo.

It is said that Henry and his brother inherited their love of poetry from their mother. Be that as it may, Melinda Kendall was a contributor to both the “Illawarra Mercury” and the “Kiama Examiner.” (See Appendix). She and her daughter, Jane, returned to the Illawarra district and for a time were living in Tarrawanna Lane, near the old Church of England.15 It is said that she also taught in the local school. A verse in memory of William Warren Jenkins is found...
in the "Illawarra Mercury" 3/6/1884, signed Melinda Kendall, Fairy Meadow. Basil Kendall's poem "Kembla" was published in the "Empire" in 1861.

Throughout his life Henry Kendall attempted to capture in his verse the essential feeling of places, the mystery and strangeness of the bush, the mountain scenery and coastal rivers. So that his songs might be more vivid, he tried to write in the language of ordinary men, though he did not always succeed. Although he spent a comparatively short time living in Illawarra, it seems certain that the things he saw and the people he met had a lasting effect. He did in fact succeed in being Henry Kendall, Native Australian Poet.

References:


—JAN KEITH.