July Meeting:

ELIZABETH MACARTHUR.—THE STORY OF A MARRIAGE.

Our lecturer was Dr. Hazel King, M.A., D.Dhil., who spoke of her present work, now in process of publication, on Elizabeth Macarthur and her husband the redoubtable John who, for all his sins and omissions, was a good husband and father. Dr. King presented a new aspect of him. He was blessed by many things in his life, but it is to be doubted if he had any blessing greater than the even temper, practical ability and deep loyalty of his sensitive and elegant wife. Indeed, it is undoubtedly true to say that much of John’s success was due to her influence, in particular because during his long absences from the colony she carried on his work in truly pioneering fashion, managing a large family too. As John lapsed into senility and insanity, she again carried on her task of consolidation. Doubtless she had always been a gently restraining influence on his irascible eruptions and rebelliousness. After his death she lived on for sixteen years, exerting her goodness in her family and, quietly, in the colonial community, until she died peacefully in 1850, aged about 73.

This is a skimpy notice of a warm and colourful lecture, but it is kept short for two reasons. The first is that perhaps next year Dr. King’s book will be on the market, to speak for itself of the richness and worth of Elizabeth’s life; meanwhile, there is a good article on her in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. The second reason is that Dr. King gave us, as a sidelight, extracts from a letter written by Anne Deas Thomson, the young bride-daughter of Governor Bourke, telling of her visit to Wollongong. On the way she stayed at Camden with the Macarthurs, and later wrote her letter from Wollongong on 11th November 1835. It is an important addition to our knowledge of our local history, so good that it is now published as kindly furnished by Dr. King. It is addressed to her brother Dick:

“We left Parramatta on the 6th and spent until 9th at Camden, three very pleasant days, old Mrs. Macarthur and Emmeline went up and made it very pleasant. George Macleay was there to dinner and of course gave me most dreadful accounts of all I should have to undergo, he made a drawing of me on Madona and said there was a pile of human bones of my unhappy predecessors where I could not fail to leave mine. That was very consoling was it not? however the sequel showed that he was mistaken. From Camden, after crossing Menangle Ford, we went through a bush road till within a few miles of Appin where we found the Saddle horses, and placing our persons on them and our baggage on two packhorses, we set out and made fourteen miles over what Major Mitchell calls ‘a rocky, barren, and unprofitable range.’ Mr. Gray the Police Magistrate, met us at the top of the mountain and had a luncheon spread for us in the shade ... with which we refreshed ourselves, after having admired the beautiful view from the edge of the cliff. I am a very hard hand at describing beauty of scenery—but you can understand this when I say we looked down upon a beautiful wide expanse of bright blue
sea, rolling its sparkling waves on a wide beach of white sand, with loud noise. Immediately under us the deep valley covered with wood, the cabbage palms raising their heads over their companions. It was very fine and made one feel odd, as if one did not like it. The descent does not commence for a mile after leaving the head of the mountain, and this mile is what I have had so often described to me—a bridle path of deep chocolate coloured soil, through a dense mass of tall trees, shrubs, climbers, conifers and ferns of all sizes and descriptions of the most beautiful glossy green and so thick as to shut out in some places the view of the Sea which you hear without seeing. (Those?) angular growths, the tall trees, and the shrubs, and then a thick growth of ferns and low spreading plants, all united by the creepers from the size of a large granadilla to the most minute leaf. But the most lovely of all is the graceful fern tree spreading out its branching heart in large bending leaves forming a complete shade, which they call the Umbrella. We got to the top of the path, and it certainly looked alarming, when I thought we had to go down it. Papa led the way a few yards down and then dismounted. I was for doing the same, but Edward her husband said "Oh no stay on." I begged to be allowed to get off, prayed, entreated, expostulated, and finally threatened, all in vain. Edward thought it would be less fatiguing to remain on than to walk, he dismounted and led my horse and it was indeed a dreadful thing—a crumbling narrow pathway with small stones rattling down on your horses’ sic feet—and there were nine horses behind me all coming down helter skelter as best they could. The long steps (Madsy?) was obliged to take, twice nearly pitched me over her head onto mine—but with the good guiding and her usual sagacity we gained the bottom without having parted Company and found Papa quietly seated at the bottom. I was most delighted to find myself there Mashallah, I was indeed. The same luxuriant foliage continued all down the pass, tho’ I was hardly composed enough to admire it. At the bottom the soil changes, and become grown thro’ with good grass, and leads to the sea beach. These five miles were the most wearisome to me riding with a deafening surf in our ears of which I suppose I was as much afraid as (Madsy?) tho’ we managed once to get into the midst of two or three waves from which I thought we should never be extracted. I was rejoiced when Mr. Gray’s cottage was in sight, as 9 miles in the carriage and twentyfive on horseback was nearly enough for one day.

10th. I took this day to rest, Papa and “his tail” as Judge Burton used to say, went to see the new road, and the stockade and all that kind of thing. They went a long round, down the valley by Mr. Shearing’s Cottage, and did not return till late in the evening. I only sauntered to Wollongong Point, and saw where the breakwater was to be—and had a clear view of the five islands.”

The following notes are not an exact quotation. On 11th they had intended to go to Illawarra Lake, but ‘Papa’ was not well and they postponed the trip until next day. In the evening Edward, Mr. Gray
and Anne took a short ride to the new line of road, which Anne thought would be beautiful when finished. The letter is unfinished and breaks off here.

—E.B.