THE MacCABES OF RUSSELL VALE

Adaptation of a talk given by Michael MacCabe to the Illawarra Historical Society on 4th June, 1992.

At the highest point of Corrimal Catholic Cemetery stands a polished red granite obelisk surmounted by a Celtic cross. At the base is inscribed

F. P. MacCABE
BORN 17th April 1817
DIED 27th June 1897
Sixth son of the Late JAMES MacCABE M.D. of DUBLIN
erected by his wife.

Who was this man of whom we are not given his Christian names or his wife's name, or where he lived - but we are given his father's name and profession and place of residence?

Until early 1986 I knew very little about my grandfather Francis Peter MacCabe except that he had been a surveyor in Twofold Bay in 1844 and Port Curtis in 1853 and that after his marriage to Jane Osborne, the eldest child of Henry and
Sarah Osborne of Marshall Mount in 1855 they had built "Russell Vale'' at what was then called Bulli and had had 14 children of which my father George was the sixth. Details of Jane and the children were well known to the family. In 1986 on my first visit to the Local History Room at Wollongong Library a hand-written note by Edgar Beale mentioned the appointment of Surveyors in England in 1841 for service in New South Wales and from an entirely different source from Gladstone Queensland I was requested to go to the Archives Office of N.S.W. where I found the original correspondence of Surveyor MacCabe to the Surveyor General covering the period December 1841 to December 1855, as well as file copies from the Surveyor General to Surveyors covering the relevant period from November 1841 to September 1856.

Francis Peter MacCabe was the sixth and youngest son of Dr. James and Margaret MacCabe (nee Russell) of Dublin. Nothing is known of the other five sons or of the dates of his parents’ deaths. The fact that his father is given prominence on F.P. ‘s grave could be because he is buried in the crypt of St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral, Dublin, in recognition of his work among the poor. F.P. MacCabe trained as a surveyor in Ireland, and at the time of his appointment as an Assistant Surveyor for N.S.W., was "carrying out surveys of the landed gentry properties in England in respect to the tithe tax” as he later pointed out to Sir Thomas Mitchell.

The party of Surveyors and Draughtsmen sailed on the "Florentia” in June 1841. All were under a two year contract from the time of their arrival in N.S.W. Their passages were paid. MacCabe and the other Assistant Surveyors were to be paid a salary of $ 200. MacCabe’s understanding was that there was at least TEN years’ work available.

The party arrived on 26th October 1841 and shortly afterwards Mitchell wrote to MacCabe appointing him in charge of a party consisting of another Asst. Surveyor a Draughtsman and 18 Convicts with instructions to go to the Snowy Mountains (which were outside the 19 Counties), survey the source of the Murrumbidgee River and then follow from the sources of other rivers to the sea, surveying the high ground in the process - a rather big job for a “new chum” as this included purchasing all equipment needed for the party. MacCabe of course had had no experience in handling convicts and as a result the party moved so slowly that Mitchell had to send to Melbourne and request Surveyor Townsend to come and take charge.

The party under MacCabe established a base camp at Cooma Creek about March 1842 and this seemed to be his base for the next five years. He carried out surveys in the Happy Jacks area, reporting that he had had to purchase clothing for the convicts, as their slop suit issue had not arrived and they were working in a state of near nudity in freezing conditions. The following year clothing again failed to arrive, and MacCabe wrote to Mitchell stating the convicts believed they should not have to work unless they had adequate clothing. In late 1843 New South Wales was in a severe financial depression and no money was granted to the Surveyor-General’s Department for the year 1843-4, and the Surveyors were advised their services would probably be dispensed with on 31st December 1843. MacCabe objected strongly to this, referring to his contract and the cost if he had to return to England. A compromise was reached early in 1844 and most Surveyors were put on 1/3 salary and appointed Licensed Surveyors who could carry out
private work. MacCabe's territory was Twofold Bay, Monaro and East Gippsland, largely mountainous and unsettled, and in fact the only private work he received was at Port Albert, 300 miles horseback riding from Cooma, for which he was paid some £ 41 and given a block of land he did not want. As his expenses came to over £ 30 it was not a very profitable trip. He pointed out to Mitchell that his total income for the year January - December, 1843 was £ 88.11.2 salary less expenses £ 63.4.11 - Balance £ 22.6.3 plus £ 11.0.0 from private practice which was far short of the £ 263.2.1. guaranteed by the Secretary of State for Colonies. By 1844 salaries had been restored but MacCabe never regained the lost wages and annual increment. He continued surveying in the South Eastern part of N.S.W., plotting the Genoa River to its mouth. He laid out part of the village of Pambula and surveyed most of the features and rivers between Cooma and the east coast of the Colony. The quality of his work was commended although a request he made in 1844 to be transferred to a vacant position in the Hunter Valley was refused by Mitchell because as Mitchell said subordinates did not apply for transfer - the Surveyor General decided when to appoint and besides MacCabe had no experience in the Hunter Valley. MacCabe replied to this apologising for his temerity in making such an application, but had not his friend Asst. Surveyor Shone applied and been granted a transfer, and was not surveying whether in the Hunter Valley or the mountains of Monaro?

However a new posting was given to him in November 1847 when he was appointed Asst. Surveyor of the Lower Darling Area, a region bounded approximately from Bourke south to present-day Hay to the Murray River then along the Murray to the South Australian border and north back to Bourke. However in the five years he spent there most of his surveying was of the Lachlan, Murrumbidgee, Murray and Darling Rivers over the entire territory as well as laying out the townships of Balranald and Oxley, and a number of pasture allotments along the river.

Mitchell again was most generous in his praise of the maps - he may not have received them when he expected them - as mail took many weeks to arrive and MacCabe could then be hundreds of miles from his base, so the delays often caused irate letters wanting to know, for example, where was the survey of the Murray from the Darling Junction to the South Australian border?

Mitchell foresaw that with the growth of the River traffic by the use of steam, this area could become the hub of the Colony with roads radiating to Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. He asked MacCabe to lay out a town which he, MacCabe, considered could be the site of a major port. MacCabe chose Moorquong, on the other side of the Darling from present day Wentworth. It was however Wentworth which went ahead, and although in 1856 he was requested to lay out a town on the western side of the Murray-Darling Junction using his field notes of 1850 it appears that this was not done before his resignation as another surveyor is given the credit for the founding of Wentworth in 1859. MacCabe during most of the time he was in the Murray-Darling had staffing difficulties. He had no sooner arrived from Cooma when he received a letter to send back to Sydney the two convicts who had accompanied him as they would shortly be due for Ticket of Leave. They would have to travel unarmed and the first settlement was some 200 miles away at Gundagai. In 1849 he was instructed to return to Sydney to go through the Convict Hulks on the Harbour and select men to return with him - this, some nine years after transportation had ceased.
The gold rushes made his position untenable as labour was impossible to get, or, if obtained, absconded, so that in late 1852 he was instructed to return temporarily to the County of Camden until things returned to normal, when he could complete the work he had started in the Lower Darling.

He finally reported to Wollongong area in January 1853 and shortly after met Jane Osborne who offered to teach him to dance. It was “love at first sight” and he wrote to Henry Osborne on 9th March asking permission to court his daughter. This - was it by chance - was also the day a letter was written to him appointing him to lead a party to establish a settlement at Port Curtis. He had been chosen “because no other Surveyor could be spared!”

Henry Osborne replied to MacCabe’s letter on 30th March agreeing to his proposal re Jane but pointing out that the differences in religion would have to be settled. He implied that as a mother has the responsibility of educating any children he expected that her religion would apply to any children they may have.

MacCabe was finally promoted and appointed Surveyor in April, although it was pointed out that he had not completed his job in the Lower Darling. He had to go about chartering a vessel and organising supplies and men for a town that was to be called Gladstone which Acting Deputy Surveyor General Thompson envisaged as being the future capital of North Australia and would rapidly grow as Melbourne had grown.

The party embarked on “The Queen of the South” in early June 1853 and after a very rough 12 day journey they arrived on 18th June.

They had been told to expect some settlers to be there already and therefore did not take any horses with them. However there was nobody there on arrival and so they had great difficulty moving their stores and collecting water which was scarce and had to be carted some distance. All provisions were salted as the little fresh food they had remaining became rotten. The lack of fresh food lasted for over six months and some of the party had to be evacuated because of scurvy. The party however set to work as soon as they arrived and it was not long before the township of Gladstone was laid out according to directions given in Sydney and MacCabe then moved westward to survey farmlets at a place he called Stowe.

There was trouble with aborigines on two occasions and the first settlers who set up as storekeepers also caused problems by publishing articles in Sydney papers ridiculing MacCabe because he refused to shoot aborigines who attacked the camp. The native police detachment had no such scruples and pursued and killed over 20 of them.

A Government Resident, Maurice Charles O’Connell, Governor Bligh’s grandson, was appointed in January 1854, but after initial co-operation O’Connell tried to usurp the Surveyor General’s role by giving MacCabe orders of what to survey. This led to definite hostility in this regard, although MacCabe supported O’Connell in matters of civil administration and also served as a Magistrate. However, as things became more difficult, MacCabe’s third application for leave due to ill health was finally approved and he left Gladstone on 28th August 1855 having surveyed some 500 miles in his last six weeks. During this period Richard Mitchell, Sir Thomas Mitchell’s youngest son, was with him as an unpaid assistant.

MacCabe’s return to Sydney was followed a few weeks later by the death of Sir Thomas Mitchell on 5th October. In early November MacCabe applied for 14
days' leave for "urgent private reasons" which was in fact his marriage to Jane Osborne on 28th November 1855 at St. Luke's church Brownsville. On 6th December he wrote to the Department requesting a further month's leave and this letter is endorsed, no doubt by the Secretary of the Department, that he could not apply for one month's leave but had to apply for 14 days' leave and then re-apply for a further 14 days. The reply of 10th December approves an extra two weeks only.

This is the last letter written by MacCabe on official files. What happened as to how much leave he had one can only speculate. Edgar Beale whose article appeared in the Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin, April and May 1983 states MacCabe never returned to the Department. This statement is incorrect. On 1st January 1856 the Surveyor General's Department ceased to exist as a separate Department but came under the control of the Department of Lands. Copies of letters to Surveyors after that date are on file but unfortunately not letters from Surveyors.

MacCabe returned to work and in January 1856 was stationed in Sydney. Shortly afterwards he was posted to Molong and sent in his resignation on 27th May 1856. He actually left the Department in August 1856. The N.S.W. Blue Book, probably because of accumulated leave, gives the date of his resignation as 7th August, 1857.

On resignation he built or moved into the completed home/farm "Russell Vale" and became manager of the Osborne-Wallsend Colliery. He remained in this position until he retired about 1883 and passed the managership over to his eldest son, Henry.

He was on the first North Illawarra Council and served as Mayor in its second year. He served on the Bench as a Justice of Peace in Wollongong and was regarded as being a just person. He stood for parliament in 1859 but was defeated. In 1896 because of his ill health the family moved to Bowral where he died on 27th June, 1897.

In 1988 as a bicentennial year project the Queensland Branch of the Australian Institute of Surveyors erected nine memorials to Surveyor/Explorers who had played a major part in opening up Northern Australia. Francis Peter MacCabe was remembered at Port Curtis Historical Village near Gladstone as a man worthy to be honoured. He is also remembered by streets named after him in Gladstone and in Balranald.

We did not discover his grave at Corrimal until August, 1988.

His widow Jane, born 30th January, 1830, later moved to Sydney and died on 25th December, 1916. She is buried next to her father at the Osborne Memorial Church, Brownsville (Dapto).

Francis (known as Frank by his in-laws) and Jane had 14 children, all brought up as Anglicans whilst he still attended the Roman Catholic church regularly.

The eldest, Henry Osborne (18.11.1856 - 1.8.1902) is best known as the hero of the Bulli and later the Mt. Kembla mine disasters where he lost his life in the rescue operations 90 years ago on July 31. He was also a licensed Surveyor and a qualified Mining Engineer. He followed his father as manager of the Osborne-Wallsend Colliery in 1883 until the mine was sold. He was Chairman of the Harbour Trust and C.O. of the South Coast Artillery. He married Marion, daughter of Rev. T. "Dean" Ewing and had one son who died unmarried and two daughters,
Margaret Russell (4.3.1858 - 1943) married Thomas, a son of "Dean" Ewing who became a member of N.S.W. Parliament and then Federal Parliament. At one stage he was Minister for Defence. He was knighted for his services. (3 sons and two daughters).

James (4.3.1859 - 7.7.1893) served his cadetship with the N.S.W. Public Works Department as an Engineer. He resigned in 1884 and spent four years at Broken Hill. In 1888 he was appointed a Member of the Sydney Stock Exchange to which he belonged until his death. He went to the Murchison Goldfields in W.A. and died of typhoid fever at D.eu in 1893.


Frank Russell (Russell) (10.11.1861 - 21.2.1896) was a sportsman, I do not know what profession he followed. He was killed when his gun discharged whilst getting through a fence near home, the Coroner’s verdict was accidental death.

George Dawson (24.12.1862 - 18.7.1934) - my father, George, had also graduated as an Engineer through the N.S.W. Public Works Harbour and Rivers Branch working mainly on the North Coast of N.S.W. He married first in 1892 and shortly afterwards was sent to the Rand in South Africa as an Engineer and Assessor. He returned to Australia after his first child died. He was employed on the Goldfields Water Supply of W.A. from 1899 to 1929, first as a contract Surveyor of the pipeline, then in the construction of Mundaring Weir and later until his retirement as District Engineer. His first wife died in 1904 and he married my mother in 1919. My two sisters and one half-sister and I are the sole remaining grandchildren of F.P. and Jane. I am the youngest of 4 sons and 4 daughters.

Charlotte Helen (31.3.1864 - 1962) married Donald Macintyre, a squatter of Kayuga near Scone, became widowed in 1904 and raised 5 sons and 1 daughter, lived most of her life in London after her children grew up.

Constance Eva (19.9.1865 - 1921) unmarried, lived at home.

Francis Peter (Frank) (26.12.1866 - 31.10.1948) took up a pastoral lease with one of the Osbornes at Lake Bathurst; also had business interests in Sydney where he lived in one of his Clubs; unmarried.

Annie Agnes (Anne) (28.1.1868 - 1949) married Dr. Edward Johnstone Jenkins. At one stage lived at Lindsay, Darling Point (2 sons, 1 daughter).

Hamilton Hill (2.2.1869 - 8.7.1869) given laudanum by his nurse to quieten him down.

Edith Hamilton (9.4.1870 -1960) married Henry A.M. Merewether, a grazier, and lived in Sydney after he died. We visited her regularly after the War but only obtained information about her mother, not father (3 sons, 1 daughter).

Maud Alice (4.9.1871 - 1965) married Henry A. Pringle, a Mining Engineer, who was also 2-I.C. of the South Coast Lancers. After years of travel with her husband to various mining areas, settled in England early in 1900s (1 daughter).

Jane Osborne (23.2.1873 - 1939) married Phillip Way late in life and died a few weeks after him.

Finally, my father and Henry were the only males to marry and my father the only one to have sons who married and keep the name MacCabe alive in Australia.
Copy of Photograph of Francis Peter MacCabe, taken at Sydney in 1889

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2. ARTHUR, Charles - Personal Diary from 6th June 1853 to 4 June 1854
   - Arthur was MacCabe's Assistant for first 12 months at Gladstone (private papers)

3. BEALE, Edgar - Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin April and May 1983

4. "BLUE BOOK" OF N.S.W. 1841-1857

5. GOLDING, W.R. - The History of Calliope Shire 1879-1979 page 26-27
   - The Birth of Central Queensland pages 42-77
6. HISTORICAL RECORDS OF AUSTRALIA Vol. XXI ages 376 ff. 406
7. ILLAWARRA MERCURY - Obituary 29th June 1897
8. INSTITUTION OF SURVEYORS QUEENSLAND DIVISION - In the Steps of our Forefathers (Noosa Graphica Press 1988)
9. McDONALD, Lorna - Gladstone - City that Waited (Boolarong Publications 1988)
10. THE PERKINS PAPERS - Various Newspaper, etc., cuttings covering the early years of Monaro Shire (Cooma Historical Society)
11. WOLLONGONG LIBRARY - Various Card Indices/Microfilms, e.g. Baptisms, newspapers.
12. Mention is also made in some Local Histories, e.g. Pooncarie on the Darling.

*** NOTE: In many instances including Government papers the name is spelled McCabe and even McCABE.

B. FURTHER REFERENCES TO THE FAMILY OF "RUSSELL VALE"

McDONALD, W.G. - 19th Century Dapto, I.H.S. 1976 page 52 refers to "The neatness of Russell Vale" as a farm compared with others in the area.

BEALE, Edgar - Illawarra Sketch Book - page 30 re Mt. Kembla Disaster, also chapters on Marshallmount and St. Lukes.

THE OSBORNE MEMORIAL CHURCH OF ST. LUKES, DAPTO, 1882-1982 - re foundation stone laying and various memorial tablets.

TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS - A HISTORY OF ST. MICHAELS,

WOLLONGONG, 1984 Photo of Marion MacCabe - Note: Foundation Stone of Hall was set by Jane MacCabe, May 1907.


THE DAILY MIRROR & SYDNEY MORNING HERALD AND OTHERS have produced articles on the anniversary of the Mt. Kembla Disaster.

W. A. ROYAL COMMISSION ON COOLGARDIE WATER SUPPLY 1902 (8th July) - evidence by George MacCabe.

W. A. BLUE BOOKS 1899-1929 re George MacCabe

N.S.W. BLUE BOOKS 1880-1893 re George MacCabe

NORTHAM ADVERTISER (W.A.) July 1934 - Obituary, George MacCabe