Aspects of the career of Alexander Berry, 1781-1873

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ASPECTS OF THE CAREER OF ALEXANDER BERRY

1781 - 1873

A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

BARRY JOHN BRIDGES, MA., MEd., PhD.

Department of History and Politics 1992
I certify that the material embodied in this thesis has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

B.J. BRIDGES.
ABSTRACT

Alexander Berry arrived in Sydney in 1819 a penniless merchant adventurer with a shipload of goods on credit and a partner, Edward Wollstonecraft, whose strengths and weaknesses were complementary to his own. Berry's great achievement was development at Shoalhaven of what his contemporaries deemed the finest estate in New South Wales and possibly the Empire. He sat in the Legislative Council for thirty-three years. He was the most forthright advocate for large-landowner hegemony, the first to articulate the case for protection, was for some years spokesman for Church of Scotland loyalists, resisted movement to democracy and opposed the spread of municipal institutions. John Dunmore Lang's 'Shoalhaven Incubus' libels and Berry's resistance to vindictive and illegal misuse of the Municipalities Act against him led to his being reviled Colony-wide as the symbol of selfish land monopolisation and champion of an outdated and oppressive aristocratic ideal.

My thesis is that the key to Berry's career is his life-long adherence to the values imposed in his formative years in Scotland under the Dundas 'System'. Landowners monopolised political rights on the ground that they alone had a fixed stake in the country. The dominant group preserved its position through control of all Scotland's Parliamentary seats, patronage, the courts and the Church. 'Stability' was the watchword, any change being suspect as prospectively harmful. The Church repressed questioning of doctrine, emphasised the duty of social harmony and reinforced paternalistic responsibility, but its efforts to inculcate high standards of morality contrasted with the elite's amoral use and defence of its power. Scots valued education and scientific and technological advances. Berry never confronted the contradictions in these forces which were reflected in his own conduct. Berry was prepared to put his scruples to one side in order to succeed but was anxious then to restore harmony between his conduct and
principles. He was politically reactionary but a progressive farmer and eager to embrace new technology. He built schools and a library for his tenants but would hedge in their personal independence. Berry treated the values of his upbringing as eternally valid while they became increasingly anachronistic.
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ABBREVIATIONS

ADB     Australian Dictionary of Biography
BP      Berry Papers, Mitchell Library
CO      Colonial Office
Col.Sec. Colonial Secretary
CSIL    Colonial Secretary's 'In' Letters
CSOL    Colonial Secretary's 'Out' Letters
DSB     Denominational School Board
DT      Daily Telegraph
edl     editorial
encl.   enclosed or enclosure
ev.     evidence
HRA     Historical Records of Australia
IM      Illawarra Mercury
IOLR    India Office Library and Records, London
JLC     Journal of the Legislative Council
JRAHS   Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society
LA      Legislative Assembly
LC      Legislative Council
ML      Mitchell Library, Sydney
NLA     National Library of Australia, Canberra
NSWA    New South Wales Archives
OPR     Old Parish Register
pt      part
SG      Sydney Gazette
SH      Sydney Herald
SMH     Sydney Morning Herald
SRO     Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh
Supt.   Superintendent
UStA    University of St Andrews
v       volume
V&PLA   Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly
V&PLC   Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council
'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might, for there is neither work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest'.

Ecclesiastes, 9 x.

Stated by Alexander Berry to be his guide to life.

'There are few more impressive sights in the world than a Scotsman on the make'.

J.M.Barrie, What Every Woman Knows.
INTRODUCTION

In the eighteen twenties Alexander Berry and his partner Edward Wollstonecraft had the reputation of constituting one of New South Wales's leading mercantile firms and they were the leaders in the cedar-getting and cedar-exporting industries. Eventually Berry accumulated a great estate of sixty-five thousand acres of freehold land in the rich Shoalhaven district and more than seven hundred acres at North Sydney. These estates, without significant addition, made his brother and heir David the first official millionaire in Australian history. As Berry tied up much land he lacked means to develop or utilise he was labelled the 'Shoalhaven Incubus' and became the symbol of selfish land monopolisation and particular target of land reformers. His estate was a model of progressive farming and a source of high quality breeding stock from an early period. Berry & Wollstonecraft were pioneers in the ship-building and coastal shipping industries in Australia and Berry participated in the earliest ventures in steam navigation to the Shoalhaven and ferry services across Sydney harbour. Berry was a Legislative Councillor from 1828 until his resignation in 1861, the last of the old nominees, but as an extreme conservative and believer in small government was remembered only for opposition to change. During the Presbyterian Schism from 1837 to 1840 Berry was agent in New South Wales for the Church of Scotland and spokesman for its cause in the legislature. Subsequently he was frequently consulted by leading ministers concerning the denomination's affairs. He was centrally involved in founding the Bank of Australia, Sydney Bank, Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Sydney Subscription Library, Australian Racing Club, and Sydney Chamber of Commerce. Berry made much of his construction of the canal linking the Shoalhaven River to Crookhaven and in later times he has received credit for organising the first attempt to effect the Argyle cut in Sydney.
Berry was determined to gain a place amongst the incipient landed gentry of New South Wales and help achieve hegemony for it. Acquisition and retention of broad acres, and of the prestige, influence and independence which went with them, was central to all his strivings and provides the framework linking his various interests and activities. In his early years in the Colony he won acceptance as a leading member of the landed elite represented in the Legislative Council, forming the unpaid magistracy and exercising social leadership. However by the eighteen fifties and sixties he stood virtually alone in espousing rule by a landed interest and continued to oppose extension of the electoral franchise, land reform, development of towns and the institution of local government. To his critics his values were 'antediluvian'.

It is my thesis that the key to understanding Alexander Berry's character and career lies in his adherence throughout a very long life to the ideals of Scottish Toryism as they were inculcated during his formative years by 'The System' of Henry Dundas. He believed devoutly in the social, political and economic dominance of a landowning class - the people who alone had a significant permanent 'stake in the country', in an essentially rural society avoiding the vices and misery of contemporary towns and in unity of Church and State. Although Berry was of an enquiring and reflective mind his voluminous papers and reports of numerous speeches give no hint of any questioning of the philosophy underlying 'The System' nor, except at the margins, deviation from the religious beliefs of his socialisation. He accepted that 'stability' was the great social desideratum, with all unnecessary change to be avoided as destructive. Berry was a child also of the 'age of improvement' in Scotland and as such remained through life a voracious reader interested in economics and all scientific and technological advances. His progressivism in these repects is in stark contrast to his reactionary socio-political views. He never confronted the inconsistencies inherent in these formative influences
or perceived that the outcomes of the spread of education and technological advancement involved social change. Berry was a man of idiosyncrasies and crotchets. In particular he was given to verbal irascibility, very rarely backed by action. In the later decades of his life he was perceived as eccentric but what impresses is not this superficial individualism but the rigidity of his conformity to an increasingly anachronistic ideology.

This is also in a sense a survey of the journey through life of one soul. Berry received a strongly religious upbringing in which emphasis was placed on ethical conduct and a regard for others. During his mercantile career as a young man he found himself dealing with unprincipled men always looking to take the main chance. They taught him the need for distrust and circumspection and that wealth and power do not fall to the scrupulous. In Edward Wollstonecraft Berry had the good fortune to find a partner who as well as being an able man of business was a misanthropic user of men with a steely temperament fitted to compensate for his own weakness and irresolution and help him turn his vision to account. Berry was obviously uncomfortable with some of the hard or unprincipled things they had to do to establish themselves, but not to the extent of drawing back. By a late marriage of convenience with Elizabeth Wollstonecraft Berry provided status and protection for his ailing friend's sister while preserving community of assets and securing ultimate reversion of Wollstonecraft's share to the Berry family. After Wollstonecraft's death late in 1832, at about the time that their financial problems were reduced to a manageable level, Berry was able to begin easing his conscience by restoring congruence between his conduct and principles. In old age Berry was often willing to trade loss of money for a sense of righteousness, but preserved a streak of hardness to the end. His morality will be seen to have been self-centred and selective.

Chapter 1 concerns Berry's family background and formative influences, Chapter 2 his unsuccessful efforts
from 1803 to make his fortune and the loss of his naivety. Chapters 3 to 6 inclusive deal with Berry's relatively brief partnership with Wollstonecraft from 1819 to 1832, during which time they moved from being penniless immigrants to ownership of a great estate with a large work force and prominence in the community. Chapters 7 to 11 survey the long period from then until Berry's death in 1873 which saw consolidation and steady expansion of Berry's landholding and wealth and involvement in the affairs of Church and State. The final section, chapters 12 to 15, covers Berry's defence of his land and elitist socio-political values against opposition within government and the rising tide of mass support for participatory government and land reform.

Research from which this thesis is drawn extended from Berry's grandparents' generation in eighteenth century Fife to the ultimate dispersal of his estates and fortune in this century.

Concepts of social class varied considerably between England, Scotland and New South Wales. My references to class are to relationships in a national setting. I have kept to broad categories.

A considerable number of relevant documents listed in registers to the Colonial Secretary's 'In' Letters are not to be found at the end locations indicated. In order to fill gaps I have sometimes made use of register annotations on the subject and disposal of correspondence, often simply to indicate the fact or timing of correspondence with the Government. Berry's memoirs written in the closing months of his life and published serially in newspapers soon after his death stop short of his settlement in New South Wales. The brief coverage of his life as a colonist in Reminiscences of Alexander Berry, Sydney 1912, were prepared later with the assistance of a ghost-writer by Berry's second cousins, the Hays. This explains my non-use of this purportedly primary material.

I have taken advantage of the convention allowing use of the ampersand in firms' names for its assistance in
distinguishing between the business entity and the partners. A legal decision is referred to as a 'judgment', otherwise 'judgement' is used. 'Numba', almost invariably used in contemporary sources, has been preferred to the modern 'Numbaa' but otherwise present-day spellings have generally been used for Shoalhaven place names.