Aspects of the career of Alexander Berry,
1781-1873

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CONCLUSION

As with most other immigrants of his era Alexander Berry came to New South Wales to take advantage of the opportunities it offered for landownership and upward social mobility.

Berry and his partner Edward Wollstonecraft provide the example *par excellence* of how trade was used in the early decades of the Colony to allow impecunious men to acquire capital to develop large estates. Neither could be accounted successful when they came together as Berry & Wollstonecraft. Each had strengths compensating for the other's weaknesses. Berry provided ideas, initiative and foresight and the forbearance and conciliatory manner needed to rub along with his prickly partner. Wollstonecraft possessed the strength of character, determination to survive, willingness to confront others face-to-face and business acumen which Berry lacked. Berry's career after Wollstonecraft's early death was essentially one of consolidating and steadily building on the spectacular gains made during their association.

Berry had the perceptiveness to see that the Shoalhaven marshes, an area others considered unsuitable for settlement, could be transformed into another Eden. Within a relatively short span of years he built up what many thought the finest estate in the Colony and perhaps in the British Empire. This was a very considerable achievement and past writers on Berry or Shoalhaven have agreed that he earned an enduring place in the history of Australia for his pioneering role in exploration, settlement and reclamation of the district and for laying the foundations for its future as a dairying locality.¹

Berry's land and wealth helped him achieve a high public profile and status through membership of the Legislative Council. He was able, when he chose, to mix at the highest levels of society and with visitors of distinction from abroad. After his wife's death he was sometimes miserably lonely, it detracted from satisfaction in his achievement that his siblings were unable to fill the roles of community leaders at Shoalhaven which he had expected of them, and sadness at the lack of a Berry heir in the next generation deepened at times almost to a feeling that the whole struggle had been an exercise in futility.

In some respects Berry's principal achievement in public life was simply occupying a Legislative Council seat for the long period of thirty-three years to become last survivor from the old nominee Council. Of the press only the *Sydney Morning Herald* ever looked favourably on his nomination. He was certainly too unpopular to win a place by election and too proud ever to try to do so by wheedling votes from those he considered beneath him. His belief in small government meant that there was little he wanted to achieve legislatively. Opposition to extension of civil and political rights and his personal idiosyncrasies caused him to be little regarded by the time he came to speak sense about protection to an unreceptive chamber. His priority in advocating protection deserves acknowledgement. Berry's principal contribution as a legislator was his long-term articulation of the cause of landowners and opposition to democracy. He was known particularly for his opposition to municipal institutions. His warnings of corruption, nepotism, misuse of rate revenue and discontent over expenditure of money raised in one locality to the advantage of another were soon vindicated. The assertion that rural New South Wales was not sufficiently advanced to require local government was largely borne out by the

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people of extensive areas of the Colony choosing not to apply for incorporation. The vindictiveness and lawlessness of the way in which opponents attempted to use the Municipalities Act of 1858 to his detriment did harm to local government and led to significant amendments to the Municipalities Act of 1867.

Berry was unusually well informed and stated his views without fear or desire for popularity. Believing himself right, he brushed aside frequent ridicule of his beliefs and looked to the passage of time for vindication and to posterity for approval.

Throughout the long period of his life spent in Australia Berry identified as a Scot. He held firmly to the ideals of Toryism and the Dundas 'System' and continued, despite long attendance at an Anglican church, to regard himself as a member of the Church of Scotland until 1864, when in his view he was forced out. Supervisory staff on the Berry estate were predominantly Scots and the bulk of tenants were at first likewise Scots. Berry's closest friends, William Lithgow and Dr James Mitchell, were fellow Lowland Scots, as were the two men he fought most persistently: John Dunmore Lang and Sir Thomas Mitchell. His ascerbic comments on socially inferior Scots colonists and Presbyterian clergy appear to derive in large part from resentment at their prominence in resisting his dictates and social philosophy. Implicit in his comments is an assumption that he had a right to the loyalty of such people.

Although much given to verbal irascibility and capable of acting strongly if pushed, Berry was a man of noted good temper and conciliatory disposition. Despite his gruff exterior and public reputation as overbearing there was much which marked him as a rather weak man. He was much given to forbearance and to procrastination, especially in matters likely to lead to confrontation with others. While physically brave he lacked moral courage. Although capable of constant agitation in a Government department to get his way he would not browbeat a man into submission with abuse
and threats as Wollstonecraft did. Likewise he would mark up store prices to extortionate levels but shy away from beating down men in face-to-face employment negotiations. When he could not return acceptable answers to correspondents he ignored them. Despite a series of problems from his brother David's failure to document contractual arrangements he failed to insist on amendment. Likewise he bore with obvious larceny by some employees, notably the sheep overseer Caffrey, rather than face the unpleasantness involved in taking action. More than once he lost his legal remedies through delay. For most of his Colonial life Berry appeared to be following at the coat tails of the iron-willed Wollstonecraft or submitting to the acts - or, rather, inaction - of his brother David, a timid individual who dominated by the false strengths of wilfulness and stubborness. By acquiescence through inertia Berry made their acts his own.

John Hay wrote: 'It is not on record that [Berry] ever tried to overreach a single individual'. Because of the great stress laid by Scots Calvinists on paying one's lawful debts as a matter of morality it was important for Berry's self image as a 'respectable' individual that he do this. There is nothing to indicate that he ever failed to settle a monetary debt and he wrote in condemnatory terms about David's slackness about paying. Nevertheless, Hay's proposition cannot be allowed. Berry deprived British creditors of their capital, sometimes for very long periods, to use it to his own advantage at a mere five per cent interest. He charged employees extortionate prices when they had no alternative to purchasing from him. He sought to keep valuable workers indebted to retain their services. He drove hard bargains in forcing sales and removal on his debtors. He grasped after rents which he conceded were set so high or on such stringent terms as to be uncollectable in full. Part of the problem of not being

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able to let more land to advantage was resistance to these terms. From his arrival in New South Wales Berry stressed that it was in his interest to be considered a good employer and that men work well only if given a personal reason for doing so. While he tolerated a great deal of slackness and low productivity under David's management he strove to the end to keep wages as low as possible. Berry grew wealthier while faithful retainers who remained with him for decades had only a pension in old age to show for a working life. While he behaved honourably to fellow gentlemen and dispensed charity generously he thought nothing of squeezing poor men on the plea that they were free to reject his terms.

One can agree with Manning Clark's summation that Berry was 'not a cruel man, but a man of "singularly antiquated ideas"'. In the press and at the tenants' testimonial dinner it was conceded that he could have been much richer had he been less humane. For the last twenty years of his life at least he was prepared to accept financial loss from mismanagement, low employee productivity, remission of rent and the carrying of arrears, which at his death amounted to very nearly one-third of his personal property. His investment in social capital beneficial to others was unequalled by any other landowner. However, some of the loss of rent was an outcome of unreasonable terms, some an inescapable consequence of destitution caused by repeated flooding. Berry can be seen as trading earnings foregone for a sense of righteousness as he atoned for his treatment of workers in the assignment era and brought his behaviour towards dependents more nearly into balance with the paternalism enjoined by his socialisation. It could be argued also that his remissions and investment were but some return of surplus value of labour of underpaid or over-rented workers.

In Berry's eyes his estate was the outcome of

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foresight, initiative and heavy investments of capital and labour. He was a generous contributor to public welfare and wished only to be left alone and not taxed so that he could get on with providing what was needed. Having achieved by the rules of his early and middle years he found that in his old age others wished to deny him his prize by changing the rules and allowing him no credit for his contribution. Berry developed a persecution complex and liked to think of himself as striving valiantly against the odds as he became a particular target for the malice of lesser men envious of his achievements. This cast his life into an heroic mould and allowed him to see himself as a victim rather than the oppressor others perceived.

Berry's public image as a monumentally selfish reactionary living in the past and his own disillusionment with the development of New South Wales society arose out of his failure to confront contradictions inherent in his beliefs and values. He did not question in part because he believed the social, economic and political systems of Scotland at the time of his youth to be universally valid rather than conditioned by time, location and circumstances. This appears an intellectual failure in an otherwise intelligent and well-informed man but the same kind of dogged insistence on trying to recreate institutions on the old Scottish model without regard to New South Wales circumstances is to be seen in many contemporary educated Scottish colonists.4

The order to which Berry was committed was rooted in a poor, pre-industrial society where money, education, experience of the world and leisure were in short supply. The privileged position of an educated aristocracy serving in public life, accepting financial responsibility for some community needs and exercising paternal care over the less fortunate could be justified as functional. It appears to have served later eighteenth century Scotland reasonably

4 See my thesis on the Presbyterian Churches in New South Wales where this is a major theme.
well, albeit accompanied by such discreditable features as rorting of the political and legal processes, rampant favouritism and repression of educated but landless individuals questioning the justice of the system. The highly influential Church of Scotland reinforced the emphasis on stability and avoidance of change as prospectively deleterious. Toryism taught Berry that men are inherently unequal and that it is irrational to share equally political responsibility and the good things of this earth. Inherent in this was that class-consciousness which showed in Berry's lifelong superior attitude to shopkeepers, belittling comments on people in humble occupations, recurrent expressions of anti-Semitism, his holding aloof from the community beyond his gates at North Sydney to meet only with the gentry, and, above all, in generalised references to 'the mob'.

Scotland was also a country whose people manifested traditionally a passionate belief in education for all and in social advancement through educational attainment. Berry's youth coincided with the 'Age of Improvement' when great emphasis was placed on scientific and technological advancement. He believed in these. He himself had taken the educational path to enhanced status. He built schools and a library for his tenants. He earned notice from the start as a scientific farmer and one of his claims to remembrance is his key role in founding the Agricultural Society of New South Wales. He was eager to embrace all kinds of new technology.

It was illogical of Berry to expect to benefit from easy access to land and an open social hierarchy and when having achieved his personal aims and helped create landowner gentry dominance to have these benefits closed off to newcomers and the process of social evolution stop. It was vain to hope for stability, interpreted as an absence of change, when advances in education and technology had brought changes undermining reasons or rationalisations for landowner hegemony and the majority of colonists saw diffusion of economic and political power as
essential to justice. It was unreasonable to expect men who had migrated to make more prosperous and independent lives to be content with the charity of benevolent paternalism and subjection to landlord dictation. It is an indication of how far Berry had progressed from his roots that he seemed genuinely unable to empathise, let alone sympathise, with poor men wanting a plot of land, freedom of action and some say in making the laws governing them, and ended believing that those opposing him at Shoalhaven could be motivated only by jealousy or malice.

There was obvious conflict between the high standards of personal and commercial conduct which the Church of Scotland sought to enforce and the behaviour of the dominant Scottish landowner clique. This was one disparity which Berry felt. During his partnership with Wollstonecraft he was prepared to engage in unprincipled acts to secure advantages leading to wealth. That he was troubled by lack of congruence between his principles and actions is indicated by his propensity for leaving Wollstonecraft the hard acts, his seeming silence to his brothers about his less creditable behaviour in this period, his false recollections of labour relations in the convict period in idyllic terms, and his virtual abandonment of the long-fought claim to Comerong rather than push it by perjury. From at least the mid eighteen-thirties Berry can be seen as acting to salve a troubled conscience and restore fit between his principles and actions.

Berry's conduct was inconsistent in a number of ways. In his eyes it was tolerable to use for his own purposes money which might have been used to repay creditors, but when Hall and Loane did the same thing to him he was outraged and considered it reprehensible. There was a contrast too between the patience which Berry & Wollstonecraft forced on their creditors and the promptness with which they took their own debtors to court. Berry never hesitated to make use of influence but when a George Tate or John Dunmore Lang was able to use influence against
him he cried 'foul'. It was acceptable to Berry to formulate the Fencing Act and then use it against weaker individuals such as Richard Mutton, William Elyard Sr and Prosper de Mestre but when his opponents sought to use the Municipalities Act, illegally, against him he was loud in complaint. Berry inveighed against democracy because it would reduce politics to self-interest and cause politicians to lend themselves to the levelling aims of the masses but no one was more transparently motivated by self-interest in the way in which he performed his legislative duties than was Berry.

Lang's 'Shoalhaven Incubus' libels caused Berry to be pilloried Colony-wide as the archetypal land monopoliser. This angered him but the Berry-Wollstonecraft correspondence leaves no doubt that accumulation of all the good land of the Shoalhaven district was the partnership's aim. Berry acknowledged from the later eighteen twenties lack of public sympathy for them as land monopolisers, their desire to monopolise was a stated reason for Surveyor Generals Oxley and Mitchell opposing some of their claims, and in later years Berry acknowledged privately to his brother that they had acquired more land than they could put to profitable use. A selfish concern to monopolise land is starkly revealed in Berry's suspicion of, and latent hostility towards, Warham Jemmett Browne and James Black when they took land at Shoalhaven and his acceptance of them both as long-term friends once they withdrew.

Berry's was an ideology of privileges for the few, amongst whom had attained a place, and deprivations for the many. In the important discrepancies between what he expected of or for himself and others the advantage was regularly with him. The perception of Berry as a man characterised by selfishness was, whatever can be said of his virtues, undeniably well-founded.