Book reviewers are those who usually choose current books as their subject matter, but at least in the precincts of an historical society it is not out of place to re-view an old book, indeed one worthy of being republished. The book is entitled "Settlers and Convicts; or Recollections of Sixteen Years' Labour in the Australian Backwoods," by "An Emigrant Mechanic." It was first published in London in 1847 and must have been a good seller for it was republished five years later in 1852.

There are readers who find fault with the work because many names, dates and places are left blank. However, the author, now known as Alexander Harris, had good reason in doing so at the time as he wished to avoid the ill-feeling that it would have inevitably engendered, his object being rather to draw attention to the affairs of the Colony than to interest in his own adventure.

The book is of particular interest to Illawarra historians as three of the early chapters are devoted to the author's sojourn in the district. Harris related that, having paid £25 for a steerage passage from London, he arrived in Sydney "in the early summer of the year 182—" and shortly afterward went to Illawarra to build a house for a settler.

In company with one of his employer's government men (convicts) he made the journey on foot from Sydney to his destination near Yallah Lake, apparently an early name for Lake Illawarra. The trip took three days and they went via Liverpool, "Campbell Town," Appin, "Bullie," thence along the beaches, and across Mullet Creek. It is of interest to quote here the description of his descent at Bulli:

"In the midst of our descent, which was so steep as to compel us in some places to stop ourselves against the trees, I was surprised to recognise the tracks of dray-wheels (drays being the common luggage conveyance of the colony); for it was evidently impossible that any beast could back a dray-load down such a steep. My fellow traveller, however, informed me that it had been let down by ropes fixed to the dray, and passed round the trees; the shaft bullock (for oxen are the draught beasts in common use) merely holding up the shafts. I was glad at length to find myself at the foot of the mountain. I think I never felt anything more difficult to bear than the strain on the knee-joints occasioned by this descent; it was not exactly pain, but something worse."

Although the year of Harris' arrival in Sydney was not disclosed, he provided clues which place it about 1828. He refers to the brothers Jem and Pat Geraghty, at Bullie. James Jervis in his paper, "Illawarra: a Century of History," says: "In 1828 there were only three or four houses in the Bulli district. Cornelius O'Brien's was the only one in 1825 and the others in 1828 were Peggy McGawley's and the Geraghty Brothers."

He also mentions the "lobsters" at Wollongong, these being the red-coated soldiers who were in the district at that time.

"Settlers and Convicts," though by no means rare, is scarce, but the Mitchell Library has a number of copies. It is interesting to know that the Library has also Howitt's Journal, Vol. 11, published in 1847, in which appears an article about the book and which (except on some points) is reasonably accurate. Part of the article is quoted later.
The author must have kept a diary to have recorded in such detail the happenings that he experienced and those which came to his knowledge during his sixteen years in New South Wales, and with compassionate understanding he succeeds in breathing life into people he writes about. Howitt’s Journal says: “The whole story is written in a clear and manly style, having every evidence of truth, and the description of the life of the settlers is one of the best we have seen. It conveys you into a country and lays before your eyes the native forests, the great plains with their wandering herdsmen and herds; the bush and bushrangers; the aborigines; the chain gangs; the solitary hut of the cattle keeper in the wilderness; of the wood fellers in the forest; and the easy prosperous life of the farmers . . . . The adventures of his life are deeply interesting as is the whole book. He is attempted to be seized on a charge of cattle stealing; some head of cattle belonging to a neighbouring magistrate having, as often is the case in the bush, got into his herd (by mistake). “To avoid prison he is obliged to fly for a time and in crossing the wild bush” (from the vicinity of Goulburn to Jervis Bay) “he well nigh perished of hunger” till befriended by a tribe of aborigines.

To pass from the subjective to the objective, Harris came to this country, then a penal colony, as a young man of the artisan class and, without friends at first, had to make his own way. In doing so, of necessity he came into contact mainly with those who shared the lower rungs of the social ladder. There was a marked difference between the social conditions of officialdom and the large convict employing landholders on the one hand and the bulk of the population of Harris’ day on the other. This comprised mainly convicts under bond, the remainder being those either free by servitude or by pardon and a small number of free settlers and artisans. Among the free and freed, there were quite a number of small landholders. It is of interest to note that in 1828, forty years after the foundation of the Colony, the population within the present boundaries of New South Wales was 36,598, of whom only about 9,000 were females. Thirty-six thousand would be only sufficient to make a moderately attended international football match today.

Harris was a keen observer and with his down to earth common sense and his ability to write about his experiences he was able to present a picture of the affairs of his day not elsewhere painted in any other journal or history of New South Wales. He tells of unscrupulous magistrates who had little appreciation of the dispensation of justice and who were ever ready to award the lash. There are sickening descriptions of floggings. He complained of the iniquitous administration of the “Bushranging Act,” under which free men were arrested on suspicion, taken long distances on foot for identification, there to be released without redress, after having been treated as criminals in the meantime. A free emigrant was especially liable to arrest as he could not produce, as freed men could, a document to prove that he was once a prisoner. Accordingly, immediate identification was often difficult.

Harris claimed that the more severe the magistrate was, the greater the number of bushrangers were in his district. Judicial measures made criminals. These bushrangers, of course, were not the hold-up men of the gold escort days but runaway convicts who attempting to escape the rigors of the law ranged the bush and lived as best they could by stealing sheep and cattle and other items of subsistence.

He tells of the sad treatment of the aborigines and the vicious administration of the “Hired Servants Act” instancing a case where a shoemaker, a free emigrant, who on hiring never supposed himself
as being hired as anything else than a shoemaker. One Sunday afternoon the Superintendent of the farm on which he worked came home and found all the men away except this man who was in his hut. The Superintendent ordered him to go down to the river to cut some grass for his horse. The man refused, saying “it was Sunday.” The next day the Superintendent brought the man before the nearby Bench, every member of which was his own intimate acquaintance. The shoemaker was convicted under the Hired Servants’ Act for refusal to work and was sent for six months’ gaol. Today we would regard this as a violation of human rights, and was one of the very incidents which caused Harris to write his book.

It is irresistible not to mention some of the other interesting bits and pieces contained in the book. The author skilfully uses the slang of his day, some of which is still in use, and in fact the work is indeed a gold mine to one who studies slang. He writes of how to settle on the land, what equipment to purchase and its cost. He tells how a pair of sawyers work, the topman and the pitman; how to erect a dwelling, and how to cook a damper in a fire on the ground, and mentions switching the ashes off with a tuft of a bullock’s tail.

No student of Australian history should overlook this classic and were it to have been published today it would be regarded as a “must.”

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