THE GARDEN OF NEW SOUTH WALES:

It came to pass that when our indefatigable local historian, Mr. Bill McDonald, recommended to A Certain Party the use of the description, “The Garden of New South Wales,” for Illawarra, that certain party caught him out neatly at his own game: she wanted to know his authority. Was that a fair question?—for everyone knows that somebody, reportedly Governor Bourke, bestowed that title on our district, and Arthur Cousins used it as the title of his rather wobbly history of Illawarra. That is all very well, but what precisely is the authority?

Mr. McDonald asked me, and I had to confess ignorance too until I chanced upon a reference in James Jervis’s “Illawarra: A Century of History, 1788-1888,” (Journal of R.A.H.S., Vol. 28), on
page 81 of which this passage appears under the heading “Illawarra, the Garden of New South Wales”: “This phrase, which is familiar to everyone in New South Wales, is said to have been coined by Governor Bourke. A press item in 1847 (sic) said:- Sir Richard Bourke, it is well known, called Illawarra the garden of the colony, at a time when her present fertile meadows were useless wilds, because her soil is of such a nature as is required for gardens.” And Jervis gives a footnote reference to the Sydney Morning Herald of 5 May 1848 (sic).

Now Bourke’s years of governorship were from 1831 to 1837, so that what was well known to the Herald and others when the news item appeared was then at least ten years old. This is not bad corroboration, but still it was not strictly contemporaneous. Better might be done, and therefore with that mixture of hide and camaraderie which goes with historical research, I wrote in hope to Dr. Hazel King, Bourke’s biographer (“Richard Bourke,” Melbourne 1971).

In all her meticulous research over many years, Dr. King, as she replied to me, had never come across the phrase about the garden, which scarcely pointed to an origin in the subject of her study. Yet on the other hand a chance remark by this governor, with his gift for saying the pleasing, diplomatic thing, might well have been remembered without any record in writing; and there is a good chance that this is what happened. Page 184 of Dr. King’s biography reveals a climate and attitude which is entirely consonant with Bourke’s utterance of the remark. She kindly amplified the reference upon which she had based the relevant passage in her book.

Sir Richard Bourke visited Wollongong twice during his term, once in 1833 and again late in 1835. On 10th November of the latter year he wrote from the incipient town to his friend Thomas Spring-Rice, who lately had been Secretary of State for the Colonies. Those were the days (B.G.—Before Grassby) when jokes about Irishmen were permissible, particularly amongst themselves. Thus as one Irishman to another Bourke expressed himself to Spring-Rice:

“This is dated from a place with rather an uncouth name—but if you could see it my dear Rice your love of the picturesque would be more than gratified. A fine sea beach, romantic mountains in the rear and an intermediate valley covered with the most beautiful plants of the temperate climate and some tropical such as the Cabbage Palm, Fern Trees and etc. and Creepers and Parasites”—he meant epiphytes—“innumerable. The soil is luxuriant and a short distance from Sydney by the great road of the Sea, will enable our poor Countrymen, who are here in considerable numbers to supply that town with Potatoes and Pigs.”

So there is still no proof of the origin of the phrase. But, Irish jokes apart, Bourke, as Dr. King says in her letter, “certainly liked Illawarra, and was very struck by its beauty and the vegetation. So he may well have referred to it as a garden.” Perhaps, then, this is yet another example of how tradition may often be soundly based in fact.

—Edgar Beale.