THE LAIRD OF SHOALHAVEN:

Miss Rachel Roxburgh, the speaker at our February meeting, is well known to most of our members, either personally or by reputation, particularly for her work on the National Trust. Her subject was “The Berry Estate at Coolangatta.”

Alexander Berry, born in Fife in 1781, studied medicine at St. Andrews and Edinburgh, and became a surgeon in the East India Company’s service. After three voyages to the East he left the service and medicine, partly, it is said, because he disliked the flogging of seamen, partly because he saw greater opportunities in trading. Over the next few years he made several trading voyages, in the course of which he visited Van Diemen’s Land, New South Wales and New Zealand, where he rescued the survivors of the Boyd massacre (including Betsy Broughton, afterwards Mrs. Charles Throsby of Throsby Park).

Deciding to settle in New South Wales, Berry and his brother-in-law Edward Wollstonecraft established a mercantile business in Sydney, and obtained from Governor Brisbane a promise of a grant of 10,000 acres on condition of taking and maintaining 100 convicts. They selected a site on the Shoalhaven. Wollstonecraft died not long after the grant issued; but Berry expanded his estates by further grants and purchases till Coolangatta ultimately became the capital of a principality of more than 40,000 acres. He established on Broughton Creek a private town, which now bears his name. To give his domain reliable communication with Sydney, he had a canal cut between the Shoalhaven River and Crookhaven, enabling ships to bypass the perilous bar at the river-mouth, and creating Comerong Island (which the government afterwards refused to recognise as part of his grant).

Having apparently found it impracticable to develop the vast estate himself, especially after the cessation of transportation and the labour shortage resulting from the gold rush, he began letting the land on clearing leases. By this means the estate was developed, though it seems that relations between Berry, his brother David (the manager on the spot), and the tenants were sometimes strained. Berry was engaged also in a running fight with the Rev. John Dunmore Lang—the Church Militant in person—who described him as “the Shoalhaven incubus” who had “reduced Shoalhaven serfs to miserable vassalage and degredation.” Berry prosecuted Lang for criminal libel, but was “greatly distressed” when the fiery minister was acquitted.

In his later years Berry became a recluse till his death at the age of 92. The estate was held for some thirty years longer, first by David Berry and then by a cousin, Sir John Hay, but was finally sold in small parcels. Coolangatta house has been destroyed by fire, but a small township of outbuildings remains as a memorial of an estate unique on the South Coast, and perhaps in Australia.