HIS EXCELLENCY MAD TOM

If you own land in Lake Illawarra, Warilla, Barrack Point or Mount Warrigal, you may find, on looking at your deeds, that it is part of 2,000 acres originally granted to Thomas Davey on 1st March, 1821. What the deeds will not tell you is that your predecessor in title was one of the oddest representatives the British Crown ever had—not excepting Sir Henry Morgan, Pirate King and Governor of Jamaica.

Thomas Davey was born about 1758, the son of John Davey, a mill owner, and his wife, whose incredible maiden name was Temperance Wynes. His father “by sturdy begging” secured for him a commission in the Royal Marines, and he served under Rodney in the War of American Independence.

As a junior officer of Marines he came to Australia with the First Fleet. According to his wife, he was the first to land, but there are many claimants to that honour. He liked the country well enough to seek a captaincy in the Rum Corps when it was formed to take over from the Marines, but his application was unsuccessful. Returning to England and service afloat, he distinguished himself in the suppression of the Mutiny of the Nore, and fought at Camperdown (like Bligh) and Trafalgar.

When the death of David Collins, the Lieutenant-Governor of the infant settlement at Hobart, was reported in London, Major Davey applied for the vacancy, and secured it, and a promotion to Lieut.-Colonel, partly through the influence of Lord Harrowby (a cabinet minister on whom he often had to rely to get him out of trouble), and partly so that he could make good from his official salary the shortages in his accounts as paymaster.

He arrived, with his wife and daughter, in Sydney in time for Christmas 1812, and evidently celebrated the festive season all too enthusiastically. Macquarie (who was Governor-in-Chief of Van Diemen’s Land as well as New South Wales) was not impressed by his deputy: "Colonel Davey’s Stay at this place, previous to his proceeding to V.D. Land, furnished me with a full opportunity of observing an extraordinary degree of frivolity and low buffoonery in his Manners, and gave me but too much reason to apprehend that, when he should have no Superior to control him, he would altogether lose sight of that Manly and dignified deportment, which his Rank in the Service, his present high authority, and his advanced time of Life [about three years older than Macquarie himself] should have all alike induced him to support."

Macquarie was a true prophet. He had warned Davey against "some very designing characters at Hobart," including the Chaplain, "a man of very loose morals, by report, [who] ought to be severely admonished when guilty of any impropriety of conduct." But Colonel Davey was hardly in a position to admonish anyone. His arrival at Hobart was typical.

(To be continued)
According to one account, "by the time for them to be rowed ashore Davey was drunk, sitting in his cabin with a bottle and a glass before him. He blinked at Mrs. Davey when, in her best dress and the charming bonnet, she dared to remind him that the boat was waiting. Pointing to the bonnet, he issued his first order in the Colony: 'You are not going ashore in that bonnet!'"

"She protested that it was the latest word from Paris; she thought only to do him credit on his landing in the colony. Port on a hot day had inflamed his temper . . . Her tears and entreaties weighed with dear Thomas not at all. He snatched the bonnet from her head and poured the port over it. He refused flatly to go ashore.

"In despair, and with her second-best bonnet, Mrs. Davey was rowed ashore with her daughter to receive the welcome of officialdom and the colonists."

Later Davey came ashore, in his shirt-sleeves, and called at the first pub he came to for a hair of the dog.

So it went on. The Lieutenant-Governor enjoyed amongst his subjects "a reputation for conviviality and earthly good nature," but was known as "Mad Tom"—perhaps it was appropriate to have a mad Governor representing a mad King.

Macquarie's repeated adverse reports at last moved Lord Bathurst to authorise Davey's dismissal "in the way least hurtful to his feeling and those of his family." Davey was given a large grant in Van Diemen's Land; but in "a pathetic appeal" to Lord Harrowby, he represented that he "had served the Crown for forty-four years in situations equally perilous and important . . . without the smallest reproach or blemish." Lord Harrowby, though he must have known better, rallied round; and Davey's grants were increased to 8000 acres, 2000 of which were in Illawarra—a bad-conduct prize if ever there was one.

Returning to Hobart as a private settler, he tried to farm his Tasmanian estates, but with little success. He apparently never tried to work his Illawarra property, which before long was sold to D'Arcy Wentworth, forming part of the latter's enormous Peterborough Estate.

The mess Davey made of his affairs aroused the sympathy of Macquarie for Mrs. Davey (described as "a lady of meek and uncomplaining spirit"—she had need to be) and daughter Lucy. In 1821 Macquarie ordered a grant of 1000 acres to Lucy (no doubt to keep it out of the hands of her feckless father, in whom, as the law then stood, a grant to Mrs. Davey would have become vested) and instructed Lieutenant-Governor Sorell to have them victualled from the public store for twelve months. In the same year Davey sailed for England to press his claims on the British government. There, in 1823, he died intestate, leaving a personal estate of less than £20.
A parsimonious Admiralty decided his widow was not entitled to a pension.

It is only fair to poor old Mad Tom to add that, as the Australian Dictionary of Biography says, "his regime saw some progress, despite pitiable resources. With the labour of the off-scourings of the Sydney convicts a gaol was built and a church commenced, the ports of Hobart and Port Dalrymple were opened to trade, the 'Hobart Town Gazette' began publication, and some police reforms were made. His handicaps included corrupt and incompetent subordinates and an inadequate revenue." And he had served his country well in war.

Mad Tom Davey contributed nothing to the progress of Warilla. But it would be a pity if such a colourful character were completely forgotten in the district of which he once owned so much.

1.—To quote again the celebrated poet Anon:

"George the Third
Was sober, monogamous, and pure in deed and word.
His family, beholding these aberrations with dismay,
Had him put away."

(Concluded)