FRANCIS PETER MacCABE OF RUSSELL VALE

Nowadays, perhaps, the main claim to fame of F. P. MacCabe might seem to be the fact that he was the father of Major H. O. MacCabe, the hero who lost his life in rescue operations after the Mt. Kembla mine disaster. But in truth F.P. was a man to be reckoned with in Illawarra during the second half of the 19th century.

A chance dip into his file of letters to the Surveyor-General (Archives Office, Sydney, 2/1554-5) has revealed much of his early life. As the fifth and youngest son of James MacCabe, a physician of Dublin, he had to make his own way in the world. This he did by qualifying as a surveyor and responding to an appeal by Lord John Russell (Secretary of State for the Colonies) for surveyors and draftsmen for the Survey office in N.S.W. On a bond of £100 he and seven others were given free cabin passages in the Florentia, which sailed from London on 6 June 1841. By the end of that year, at a salary of £200 annually, he had been placed in charge of a party, largely of convicts, heading for an extended service, to be based near Cooma, mapping the Monaro and Snowy River down to the southern coast.

On the journey there, he had to contend with three main hardships: the rough terrain, unruly convicts, and his departmental chief, the redoubtable Sir Thomas Mitchell, whose pungent comments enliven the margins of F.P.'s reports and letters. Mitchell spoke of his "strongest dissatisfaction" with the "disastrous" progress of the party. MacCabe wrote of stabbings and drunkenness ("where did they get the liquor?" asked Mitchell) and complained that the convicts gave him a particularly bad time, "trying it on" him as a "near chum." F.P. was a hard and conscientious worker, and his men resented his expecting them to be the same. Yet it seems there was something lacking in his leadership, because although the man guilty of stabbing another was sentenced to fifteen years' transportation, the trial judge commented on aspects of neglect by F.P. Though Mitchell was a tough boss, he did give credit where it was due, and was willing to back down and accept explanations; but somehow MacCabe never seemed to be quite free of trouble.

By 1844 he was back at headquarters in Sydney, disappointed at failure to receive annual increments of salary which had been promised him. The fact was, however, that the Land Fund was so low that surveyors were in danger of receiving no salary at all. So the system of appointing licensed surveyors evolved: civil servants with a right of private practice. MacCabe was sent to Monaro again, based at Eden and Twofold Bay, only to find his work very unrewarding. At one stage he was as far south as the Genoa River. Again he complained of his poor salary, and of such things as getting to a dentist, his teeth being in a poor state.

In February 1848 he was on his way to a new posting, the Lower Darling, operating from what is now Moulamein over a huge area, including the Murray, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers, and the
Darling as far north as Bourke. He laid out many towns and mapped the rivers, regarding the whole area as desert except for the “available” country a mile or so on either side of the rivers. He used Aborigines to tell him native names of local features. In 1849 he found labour hard to get, a condition which worsened during the gold rushes. By 1852 the traffic along the rivers dwindled alarmingly. He could get no men from Melbourne or Adelaide, and a team he recruited in Sydney absconded as soon as they were conveniently near the goldfields; their enlistment was a ruse to get a paid passage there. Mitchell’s snorting comments were about as frequent as ever, and even his milder deputy, Captain Perry, was critical. It is not surprising that in 1852 F.P. had to seek leave to go to Melbourne for his health’s sake. After a month he was back at the daily grind in the Lower Darling region.

Then came a happy break; for several months in early 1853 he was in a cushy posting, camped near Wollongong in Illawarra. If his work, marking small portions and farm boundaries, may have been sissy stuff compared with his outback years, it soon ended when he was sent to Port Curtis in what is now Queensland, on what was termed an expedition. —Edgar Beale.

(To be continued)

ALEXANDER MACLEAY

Our speaker at the meeting on 2nd February was Dr. Hazel King, M.A., D.Phil., F.R.A.H.S., the President of the Royal Australian Historical Society. Her subject was Alexander Macleay (1767-1848), whose career she has made the subject of a special study.

To most people interested in Australian history Macleay is a little-known figure, but for eleven years as Colonial Secretary he held a position second only to the Governor’s in the administration of New South Wales. He worked harmoniously with Darling, with whose Tory politics he agreed; less harmoniously with Bourke, the nominee of a Whig government. His disagreements sometimes led to his openly opposing Bourke’s proposals in the nominee Legislative Council—which was not the conduct expected of a Colonial Secretary. Despite strained relations with the Governor, and advancing age, he held on tenaciously to office. It was a financial necessity to enable him to provide for his seventeen children and to live in the style in which he was accustomed—what that style was may be judged from the fact that he was building Elizabeth Bay House. Finally Bourke took advantage of an indiscreet reference to retirement, and Macleay found his resignation accepted before he realised he had offered it.

Though Macleay had acquired several grants and squatting rights which ultimately turned out very valuable, in the “economic climate” of the 1840s they were not immediately very profitable, and Macleay’s last years were dogged by financial troubles. Threatened with insolvency, he had to sell most of the Elizabeth Bay prop-
This was frontier life: frequent attacks by Aborigines, shortage of water, prevalence of disease, poverty of diet and supplies. A gold discovery locally did not help in that unsettled district. He laid out the town of Gladstone, and a sour relationship developed with the Government Resident there. Still F.P. wrote complaining of his salary and that others seemed to be promoted over him. The life was telling on him; he threatened a libel action, and reacted hot-headedly to things. In 1852 he had complained at a life of ten years in a tent. Now he asked bluntly for a move to a "civilized district." and by October 1855 he was back in Sydney. But his departmental life was nearly ended. On 20th November he obtained leave for "urgent private business." He never went back to his department and the correspondence ends in the following December.

It is not hard to guess the nature of the private business. In his short sojourn in Illawarra, F.P. had obviously mapped out a very comfortable future for himself, for on 28 November 1855 at Dapto he married Jane, the eldest daughter of that rich magnate with a far-flung pastoral empire, Henry Osborne. In bland disregard of the preachings of the Rev. Thomas Malthus, Jane was one of a family of thirteen, a score which she and F.P. were to top; they had eight daughters and six sons. When he died in 1859 Henry's estate was sufficiently enormous to set up all of his large family in enviable style.

For that matter, F.P. himself must have had some considerable savings. His salary, for all his expressions of dissatisfaction, was good, and his way of life was cheap, in that even opportunities to spend were infrequent. Indeed, it has been said that F.P. was rather close-fisted. Be this as it may, he soon become a community leader, and was one of the local magistracy. Nor can one begrudge this long-time tent-dweller the comforts he built around him and his family. In a pretty, wooded fold in the foothills at Bellambi he raised a spacious mansion known as Russell Vale, the name doubtless deriving from his mother's maiden name. In the grand manner it had an imposing drive up to a large front door sheltered by iron-laced verandah and balcony above. The entrance hall was impressive, its western end being taken up by a cedar staircase, on the landing of which was a window of stained glass leadlight with the family crest worked into it. (This, of course, is the window now installed in the Society's Museum). The rooms in the house were of fine proportions with high ceilings and fine fireplaces, the two upper front ones having a folding partition which allowed the two rooms, opened into one, to serve as a ballroom with french doors opening out onto the balcony.

Though my mother could recall the house in its heyday (see I.H.S. Bulletin, May 1978), I remember it only as a sad derelict. This was when it was due for demolition. The property must have been sold many decades before, perhaps even in the 1890s, for F.P. died in Bowral in 1897, and his widow at Darling Point in 1916. It had
come into the hands of the neighbouring mine, and was then so neglected that only the ground floor could be occupied. Then the whole structure and its gaggle of outbuildings at the rear became unsafe; demolition was inevitable, the saving grace being that our Society was allowed the pickings. These have given us not only the window, but a late Victorian ornate fireplace and overmantle which, being out of character for the museum, were sold. We still hold in store a most elegant marble surround and grate which will find a home worthy of it some day.

Justified or otherwise, old F.P.'s reputation for stinginess still haunted the place. I was in charge of the pickings, and said to the caretaker (this was about 1966) that we should crowbar up some of the hearthstones because of the custom of placing coins under them in the building. But the caretaker said that what he had heard of the old man he wouldn't put a lousy ha'penny there. I can't really speak for or against the meanness; all I know is that we didn't find a farthing.

Mercifully, the old man was spared the tragedy of the death of his first born, Henry Osborne MacCabe, in the disaster of 1902. A man much loved for his own sake, he had followed in his father's footsteps as a surveyor, and the heroic death fittingly recalls those years spent by the elder in rough bush camps while he battled to record the unknown and create official order out of the near-chaos of squatterdom. —EDGAR BEALE.

AROUND THE SOCIETIES

The following extracts have been gleaned from Bulletins received from sister historical societies:

**Scone and Upper Hunter:**
“The teatowel hemmers, under Mrs. Ashford's organizing hand, continue their profitable hemming of historical teatowels for our funds.”

and—“During the year financial support was again provided by Scone Shire Council with a grant of $600.”

**Canberra:**
Blundell's Farmhouse has 10,000 visitors per year.

**Harden-Murrumburrah:**
A “bring something interesting night” proved very successful, with each member bringing something to show and talk about. e.g., Dick Littlejohn brought in a traveller's lamp, consisting of a tin box containing candle and matches which could be stood or hung in any position. Does this give us an idea for a new angle on our traditional “members' night”?

**Campbelltown:**
A brochure entitled “Historic Campbelltown, N.S.W.” has been received. It lists 30 places of historic interest with brief information on each, accompanied by a numbered map to show locations. Ideal for the DIY tourist.