MATTHEW BOYLE DEVENISH MEARES  
(First Rector of Wollongong, 1838 - 1857)  
[Address given at St. Michael's Cathedral, Wollongong, 30 March 1988]  
by  
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Birth and Family: Matthew Devenish Meares was born in 1800, 12 years after the settlement of Australia. We do not know the day or month of his birth. There were no registrations of births, deaths, and marriages in those days, and no ordination papers have survived for that period of Irish history. But we do know that he was baptised on 27 June 1800. He was the second son of William Devenish Meares of Meares Court, Co. Westmeath and Deborah, nee Coghlan. The middle name of both father and son was ‘Devenish’, but this was probably not part of their surname, which was merely Meares. The surname Devenish-Meares was used by Matthew’s children, of whom there were legion to be precise. Devenish, founded in the sixth century A.D. and subject to Viking raids was the site of one of Ireland’s most important monasteries.

Education: Meares was educated privately and in Trinity College Dublin at which he was enrolled on 4 November 1816 and from which he graduated B.A. in 1822. In some ways, Trinity College Dublin, was a more progressive institution than either Oxford or Cambridge: it underwent a major reorganisation in 1833 which was the envy of the English Universities. But that was a decade after Meares’ graduation. In Meares’ time the four-year undergraduate course placed equal emphasis on classics and science by which was meant logic, ethics and mathematics. Having graduated, ordinands were expected to attend for a year the lectures of the Regius Professor of Divinity and Archbishop King’s Lecturer in Divinity. Meares’ name in the College registry is entered as Matthew Boyle Devenish Meares, the only place in early documentation on Meares where the name ‘Boyle’ appears. That is not sufficient reason, however, to doubt that Meares was so named: Boyle was the King of Cork from whence Meares hailed. There is also a town in the centre of Ireland by that name.

Marriage: On 23 June 1822, in St. James’ Church Dublin, he married his second cousin, Georgina Augusta, daughter of Charles Devenish. In spite of the fact that she bore him 11 children (7 sons and 4 daughters), she survived him and died on 28 June 1881, aged 81.

Appointment to NSW as a chaplain: He was made a deacon on 24 November 1824 and priested just six days later (30 November). Then just 20 days after that, he received a chaplain’s warrant. What was the rush? It would seem that he wanted to board ship en route for Sydney Cove, at which he arrived on 10 July 1825. The ship was the ‘Mariner’ which was a transport, and Meares, together with his wife and two children, would have shared the ship with convicts. They would not have been promising prospective converts if a previous voyage of the ‘Mariner’ is any guide. In 1816, with the ship endangered by a heavy squall off the Cape of Good Hope, the evangelical surgeon superintendent, John Haslem, warned the convicts of their ‘awful state’ and to spend their last hours in repentance: ‘But,’ recorded the good doctor in his fascinating book Convict-Ships published in London in 1819, ‘in vain: the violence of the tempest had
inspired them with additional excitement and my admonitions were drowned in a roar of blasphemy.5

But why did Meares want to leave Ireland for a convict colony? I do not know, but I have a clue! When I was working in the archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1973 I unearthed an exercise book unhelpfully labelled 'General Correspondence Book'. It consists of letters addressed to the Rev. Anthony Hamilton. He was secretary of the SPG, but I concluded that the book had little to do with the missionary society. It pertained, I thought, to the 'Ecclesiastical Board for the Superintendence of the Colonial Church' set up by Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and of which Hamilton was also secretary (he was a notorious pluralist - all pluralists were notorious! - Hamilton was also Chaplain in Ordinary to the King, Rector of St. Mary-le-bow, Rector of Loughton, Essex, Archdeacon of Taunton, Prebendary of Wells, and Canon of Litchfield). If I'm right about the purpose of the exercise book that is an exciting discovery, because historians have been looking in vain for a long time for the records of the Board. Anyway, I had never heard of Matthew Devenish Meares in 1973 and I did not look for him in that book. But what I did note at the time was that many, perhaps a majority, of the letters came from graduates of Trinity College, Dublin. The tenor of these letters may be gauged from a couple of extracts. One, written in 1822, the year Meares graduated from Trinity College, read 'Being without fortune, or interest in this country, I am desirous of obtaining if possible, an appointment as Chaplain to some Colony abroad'. A second, written in 1824, the very year of Meares' ordination and licensing as a chaplain, says: 'I am a clergyman of the established Church, and as but too frequently is the case with the inferior members of that profession, in no very affluent circumstances: and what is perhaps still worse my prospects for future advancement are by no means encouraging.'6 These letters reveal that it was then very difficult for a young clergyman of the United Church of England and Ireland to obtain well paid appointments in Britain. The situation was clearly very difficult in Ireland where there was stiff competition for each vacancy. Probably, the economy was then sliding into what was to become known as 'the panic of 1825' which threw many out of work. Shades of Wollongong in the 1980s.

Economic necessity was not the sole cause of the coming to Australia of significant numbers of Irish clergy. Politics was also a factor. After the Battle of Waterloo there was something of a revival of the forces of conservatism. In 1819 the British Crown, alarmed at the possible spread of the pernicious doctrines of the French Revolution, moved to strengthen the Colonial Church as its chief instrument for 'the Advancement of Religion and Virtue'7: the Colonial Churchmen's Act was passed to secure more clergy for the colonies. This was the opportunity young Irish clergymen were looking for. Ken Cable has estimated that 17% of all Anglican clergy who worked in Australia between 1788 and 1850 were born in Ireland. The percentage was not much lower for the period 1851 - 1880.8

But, economic and political factors were not alone in motivating young Meares. Protestant Christianity was in a state of healthy revival in early nineteenth century Ireland. 1800, the year of Meares' birth, was 9 years after the
death of John Wesley, and 8 years after a great religious awakening associated with the names of Rowland Hill of London and Thomas Kelly of Dublin. Kelly was author of 800 hymns, including 'We sing the praise of him who died' and 'The head that once was crowned with thorns', hymns which will be sung in many Australian churches this Eastertide. 1816 was an annus mirabilis for foreign missions - the Church Missionary Society, for example, which had languished throughout the Napoleonic Wars was greatly strengthened. In 1820 the CMS sent the first of its prospective missionaries to be trained at Trinity College Dublin. J.H. Singer, fellow and tutor, and, after Meares' time, Regius Professor of Divinity, gave unstinting support to CMS and, like his contemporary Charles Simeon of Cambridge, sent a large number of chaplains and missionaries overseas. Trinity College Dublin in Meares' time, then, was something of a stronghold of evangelical religion.

So, young Meares was part of a significant emigration of Irishmen in general and clergymen in particular who came to New South Wales in response to strong economic, political and religious forces and were to make a lasting impact on Church and State in Australia.

First Parish: Politics and evangelical religion were also represented in the names of the villages of Meares' first parish. From 1 August 1825 to 31 March 1838 he was licensed minister of Pitt Town, with Wilberforce and Sackville Reach. Meares is said to have been the first chaplain appointed to the lower Hawkesbury. He conducted weekly services at Wilberforce, every second week at Pitt Town and Sackville (alternating), and once every three months at Wiseman's Ferry. Here, and throughout his entire ministry, he seems to have avoided 'the Botany Bay disease', which infected most of the early chaplains with an inordinate hunger to acquire great tracts of land. He was paid a salary of 250 pounds, and had assigned servants to look after his 300 sheep, 40 cattle, and two horses. He sought to supplement his income by advertising to take in eight young gentlemen for their education at 54 guineas each per annum. A contemporary document shows that he applied to the government for one convict servant and was assigned two. Things have changed.

Shortly before his departure for Wollongong, he had a building erected on 41½ acres at Pitt Town which doubled as a school and a chapel. This was good practice for his school and church building programme in Illawarra. A letter written at Pitt Town to his eldest brother, John, reveals the range of interest of the exiled Irishman. He promised to send his brother some copies of the Colonist, 'our best edited paper as far as talent goes, but yet not worthy of implicit faith, as it is written with a strong bias, by a Presbyterian Minister, Dr. Lang, whose temper is not one of the most amiable.' He mentions that 18 of his 35 cattle had died in the worst drought the colony had yet experienced, and to make things worse, 'a very extraordinary disease' had appeared among the sheep. His eldest boy, William, was doing extremely well at the King's School, where incidentally, he was a classmate of John Watsford, who was to become Australia's most prominent nineteenth-century native-born Methodist minister. Meares wrote that he would love to be with his brother and family around their fire at Christmas, 'but that cannot be, as I shall never leave this place, and yet my heart yearns after my dear country and friends'. He concluded his letter:
I have a large parish about as large as the half of Westmeath with three places or worship and five schools in which there are 130 children. I find the more I have to do the better my health and the heat, however great, does not affect me.  

**Wollongong:** From 31 March 1838 to 11 August 1857 he was Wollongong's first rector. We know that in his first year he was at least commodiously housed. In the *Australian*, a Sydney paper, there appeared the following advertisement on New Year's Day, 1839:

Maedemoiselle Dubost has taken that spacious house lately occupied by Rev. Mr. Meares at Wollongong where she intends opening an establishment for the Education of Young Ladies in which undertaking she will be joined by Miss Story, a young lady of high respectability and whose accomplishments fit her for so arduous and responsible a duty.

Reading between the lines, however, Meares inherited a difficult situation. The previous chaplain, Frederick Wilkinson, had fallen out with Archdeacon, later Bishop, Broughton, over the former's 'over-indulgence in land and livestock'. Then he supported the introduction of Governor Bourke's 'Irish system of education, which his Bishop vehemently opposed. Hence, Wollongong was the only town in NSW which built an 'experimental school' to introduce Bourke's scheme, which was designed to have children of all Christian denominations taught in the one school using an agreed syllabus inoffensive to the particular convictions of the various churches. Meares had no wish to displease his bishop and, when he took over from Wilkinson, he opposed the scheme. Together with the Presbyterian minister, John Tait, whose mentor, John Dunmore Lang was as opposed to Bourke's scheme as Broughton, Meares organised a petition against the government school, securing 36 signatories. Father John Rigney, the local Catholic priest, organised a counter-petition of 112 names, including parents of 'the humbler classes' whose children would be more likely to attend the Government school. Meares accused him of rigging the petition, and an unholy dispute ensued. The school failed because Meares saw to it that it was left unoccupied for a decade.

This was not the end of Meares' problems. Wilkinson had been so distressed with his lot at Wollongong that he had neglected to build a church. Broughton advised Meares to take advantage of Bourke's Church Act of 1836 to secure from the government sufficient funds to build one. Without waiting for the arrival of those funds, Meares energetically organised for a substantial school to be built in Market Street in 1839. He had another school opened at Kiama in 1842. The Wollongong school had to double as a church until 1847. On 14 October 1840 the foundation of the proposed new church was laid by Broughton. Then over lunch in the Wollongong Hotel the Bishop and his party altered the plans to provide for the erection of a stone, rather than a brick, church. The builder sued, and the case was determined against Meares.

Why wasn't the 3000 pounds experimental school and a brick Church good enough for Meares? He opposed both for the same reason. In Meares' early years at Wollongong there was much talk of the abolition of transportation, and this was accomplished in 1840. Meares had not neglected the convicts among his flock: he took services at the convict stockade in Wollongong every Sunday. But he shared the view that New South Wales must put its convict
past behind it and start building for a new nation. Brick churches were unworthy of the new nation. And children would be ill prepared for their role as future citizens if educated under Bourke's permissive scheme.

As with many Protestant clergymen of the nineteenth century, Meares was a champion of progress and civilisation, and he was excited by the commercial prosperity promised by the opening of the district's first coal mine in 1849. In the previous year the monopoly given to the Australian Agricultural Company to mine coal in Newcastle had been lifted. On 27 August 1849 the first Illawarra coal was taken to Wollongong harbour in a procession watched by 'cheering gentry and respectable farmers'. The procession, sporting banners inscribed 'Advance Illawarra' was led by Captain Shoobert, mine owner, and local historian have assumed on the basis of a press report (SMH, 10 September 1849), the Rev. Matthew Devenish Meares. More likely, it was the rector's son.18 Whoever it was, it is significant that the Anglican Church should be associated with the Illawarra coal industry since its inception. As I hope I have demonstrated in my study of Illawarra Christianity, Faith of Steel, the local churches have proved amazingly successful in involving themselves in the everyday lives of the people. Meares was a not insignificant pioneer of that involvement.

Four years (12 April 1842) after his arrival, his licence to Wollongong was extended to Shoalhaven, Kiama, and Jamberoo. In fact, until 1850, when Kiama Parish was created, Meares' jurisdiction covered the entire Illawarra and Shoalhaven districts. He was, as Duchesne has pointed out, father of all the churches: Dapto, Jamberoo, Kiama...19 As he sought to develop the parish, one of his last actions was to acquire land at Mount Kembla for a school house. A year after his departure the school started to be used as a church and the little Anglican Church at Mount Kembla continues to this day.20 Clearly Meares opened and supervised a large number of schools during his years as a minister. He was not the author of his Church's education policy in NSW, but he was clearly energetic in the implementation of that policy.

A nice insight into the Christianity of the era is afforded by an incident involving the local Methodists. Meares, the product of an evangelical Christianity hospitable to the Methodism of John Wesley, allowed the first ordained Methodist minister, the Rev. William Schofield, to preach from his pulpit on his first visit in 1839. When, however, a Methodist local preacher, John Vidler, started to promote revival throughout the district and won the respect and support of Henry Osborne, the leading landowner of the district, Meares, fearing that he was losing his congregation, tried to stop the rot. He declared that Vidler would have to go. Not that Meares was a sycophantic cultivator of the favours of the wealthy. He once expressed the opinion that wealth was not the only qualification justifying election to the district council: moral and intellectual fitness were 'of much more importance'.21 Meares lost his tussle with Vidler who stayed on to preach the gospel at Osborne's bidding. But the rift cannot have been too serious: there are today many Osborne-Meares and Meares-Osbornes.

Burwood: Meares was licensed to the parish of Burwood and Enfield from 1 September 1857 to 8 August 1860.

Death: Meares died on 5 December 1878 at his residence, 'Olivia Terrace', in Darlinghurst. He was buried at St. Thomas' Enfield. A Memorial tablet is at St. Michael's Wollongong, the scene of his longest labours. It reads:
TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN MEMORY OF THE
REV. MATTHEW DEVENISH-MEARES, M.A.
BORN MEARES COURT, IRELAND, 1800
WHO DIED DEC. 5TH 1878. AGED 78
FIRST INCUMBENT
OF THE ILLAWARRA-SHOALHAVEN DISTRICT
FROM 1838 TO 1857
AND
GEORGINA AUGUSTA
HIS WIFE
WHO DIED JUNE 28TH 1881 AGED 81

1. The chronological outline of this address, given at the 150th anniversary of the licensing of M.D. Meares to Wollongong, is based on biographical data generously supplied to me by Associate-Professor Ken Cable, from his forthcoming biographical register of the Anglican clergy of Australia. I am also grateful to Dr. Stanley Devenish Meares who supplied me with copies of material relating to his great-great grandfather.


5. A.M. Grocott, Convicts, Clergymen, and Churches, Sydney, 1980, p.44.


7. The words are from Meares' commission as a chaplain, announced in the Sydney Gazette, 14 July 1825.

8. Australian Anglican Clergy, 1788 - 1952, unpublished table issued at conference of the Australian Historical Association, Sydney, February 1988. Professor Cable's address was entitled 'The Social Composition of the Australian Anglican Clergy'.


10. Sydney Gazette, 23, 26 November and 31 December, 1827.

11. Governor Darling's despatches, 1828-1830, p.358, frame no. 1-43


13. Ms. letter in the possession of Dr. S. Devenish-Meares, dated 29 December 1835.


21. SMH, 16 April 1844

"Conrad Martin in Illawarra" will be completed in next issue.