



THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

HISTORY CLUB

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No. $\frac{3}{2}$

1978

Donation: Fifty Cents

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**No. 3
1978**

Authorised by Geoff Robinson, Secretary, History Club.

Typeset and Printed by the S.R.C. Office.

PREFACE

This journal is the third in a series commenced in 1976. In that year it was decided to publish the most original and best presented papers received in Australian History. The essays involved original research and frequently touched on local history topics.

The 1976 initiative has attracted a good deal of favourable comment. The journal now in fact circulates to most Australian libraries.

Our students this year have maintained the standards of previous years. The papers are relevant and imaginative. Congratulations are extended to those whose papers have been selected for publication to the "honorable mentions" listed below, and to the many other students who invested energy and hours in the project.

Howard Byfield	"The Settlement of the Rivers"
Graham Byrnes	"Whaling off the East Coast of Australia"
Suzanne Javes	"The Significance of the Hotel in Australian History"
David Kilby	"The Federated Seamens Union of Australasia and the 1925 Elections"
Danny McCloghry	"Governor Phillip and Major Ross – the Settlement under Strain"
Stephen Pullin	"St. John's Theological College – Armidale to Morpeth"
Tim Wellcox	"The Bush Myth in the Australian Legend."

C. Bacchi
P. Hempenstall
N. Rutherford.

Once again, the History Club is pleased to be associated with the presentation of this collection of essays. The finished product is a fitting tribute to the authors of the essays as well as Carol Bacchi, Peter Hempenstall and Noel Rutherford of the History Department who initiated the whole project.

History Club Executive.

“DAWSON, THE AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURAL COMPANY,
AND THE MANNING RIVER”.

BY

LYN STRAHAN.

SYNOPSIS:

The dismissal of Robert Dawson from his position as Chief Agent of the Australian Agricultural Company in 1828 followed a number of accusations made against him by the Company's local committee. This paper is a study of one part of these accusations – that is, Dawson's activities in the Manning River area, or, more particularly, the misappropriation of A.A.Co. articles and labour to the area for Dawson's personal benefit. Dawson's true motives are obscure in his initial interest in the Manning River area, however, the importance of his personal motivation later on cannot be concealed.

Following Bigges' recommendations for the use of incentives to encourage free settlers with capital to migrate to New South Wales the British Government instituted a policy of Crown Land Grants. In this settlers were given free grants of land in accordance with the amount of capital they would put forward. This system led to the formation of joint stock companies in England, the most important being the Australian Agricultural Company (AA Co.) which was incorporated by an Act of Parliament and a Royal Charter on 1 November, 1824, to develop the fine wool industry and to cultivate grapes, flax and olives in the "waste lands" (that is, outside the limits of location) of New South Wales.¹

Robert Dawson, Esq., was subsequently appointed as principal agent and manager of the AACo. Although he was a man of extensive experience in the control of private estates in England, he knew nothing of the conditions in New South Wales. To advise and assist him was "a committee of Five Gentlemen resident in the colony" who, even so, also could not have had an extensive knowledge of the country.²

The Company was granted one million acres of land which the Committee located in an area extending from Port Stephens up to the Manning River. Dawson arrived at Sydney in November 1825 with a number of fine wool sheep he had procured in Europe and was established at the Port Stephens headquarters in February, 1826.³

By May 1827, the pastoral establishment was progressing noticeably and after his visit to the settlement James Macarthur (a member of the Committee) wrote of Dawson's "good management" and of the good condition of the stock.⁴

However, high losses on the Company's activities began to appear and the stock did not thrive in the wet coastal environment. Consequently the Committee began to doubt the suitability of the Port Stephens location of the grant.⁵

Rather than admit their mistake of selection it appears the Committee accordingly looked for some alternate way of explaining the apparent failure and it was not long after Dawson incurred the Committee's wrath by informing James Macarthur in June, 1827, that he was "no longer disposed to make the Company Grant a burial ground for all the old sheep of the colony" that he was accused of mismanagement and extravagance in the estate and of misconduct due to personal motivation.⁶

It is generally considered that in the cases of mismanagement the Committee was as blameable as Dawson due to their apathy and negligence of their duties.⁷ This was acknowledged by the London board of directors in their inquiry into Dawson's activities (January 1829) when they stated:

"...the misconduct of Mr. Dawson is far exceeded in culpability by that of the Committee, whose orders he was to obey."⁸

The board consequently dispensed with the Committee before sending out Dawson's replacement.

Two examples of the Committee's culpability include, firstly, the footrot the European sheep acquired whilst they were detained at the Retreat Farm, Parramatta – selected by the Committee even though the owner had previously moved his flocks as the land had become infected. Secondly, the high prices Dawson paid for the local sheep were artificially inflated by the sheep-breeders of the Committee – who took the Company's money whilst condemning Dawson.⁹

Dawson's actions in connection with the Manning River Estate and John Guilding, however, are commonly viewed as "inexcusable" and "especially blameworthy". Although the bulk of the evidence appears to confirm this there is also some evidence that Dawson initially became involved in the "Manning River Affair" with the Company interests at heart, and the involvement only later extended to personal interests.¹⁰

Following James Macarthur's "visit of inquiry" to Port Stephens on 27 December 1827, Dawson was charged in a number of instances relating to the Manning River and John Guilding, which were formally set out in the "Report from the Committee", 7 January, 1829, for the London Inquiry. This report made accusations against Dawson.

".....in regard.

...

2nd To the Company's Artificers having been employed in making Furniture and Implements of Husbandry for a Mr. Guilding.
3rd To an expedition by sea sent by Mr. Dawson to the Manning River having been put under the orders of this Mr. Guilding.
4th To Mr. Dawson's Letter to Mr. Oxley, the Surveyor-General, on the subject of a grant of Land.
5th To Mr. Guilding's correspondence with Mr. Dawson, which fell into the hands of Mr. Macarthur."¹¹

The predominance of "this Mr. Guilding" in the AACo's sea expedition of October, 1827 and the value of the concurrent land expedition led by Mr. Macleod, both to the Manning River, greatly fuelled the Committee's fiery attack on Dawson.

The sea expedition was not only the first one successful in gaining entrance to the Manning River, but also in tracing the river as far as navigable. Previous expeditions to or through the Manning River area had failed to follow the river or to ascertain the type of country along its banks. The value of this expedition to the A.A.Co., however, was seriously questioned by the Committee, particularly after evidence was given at two meetings of the A.A. Co. proprietors by Mr. Armstrong, the Company Surveyor, who was a member of this expedition. On 27 February 1828, Armstrong claimed:

"that he was informed by the Pilot that Mr. Guilding was to have the entire direction of the expedition..."¹²

and later, on 21 March 1828, he stated that

"the said expedition . . . was conducted and ordered by Mr. Guilding and principally for his benefit . . ." ¹³

This evidence, together with Armstrong's journal with comments such as " . . . Mr. Guilding determined on settling here and . . . it gave me . . . pleasure to see his wishes thus realized. . . " ¹⁴ and the fact that both Dawson and Guilding subsequently applied for grants of land on the north bank of the Manning River, led the Committee to write in their report to the London Inquiry:

"It seems impossible to arrive at any other opinion than that this expedition was designed by Mr. Dawson to be made subservient to the personal interests of Mr. Guilding and Mr. Dawson's family..."¹⁵

It is not "impossible", however, to come to any other opinion when one reads Guilding's letter to Dawson, dated 17 April, 1828 and Dawson's report to James Macarthur on 31 January, 1828.

In his letter Guilding indignantly rebuked the "low suspicion" the Committee harboured in respect to his role on the voyage and the obligation then perceived him to have them due to his establishing his grant whilst on an

A.A. Co expedition. Conversely, Guilding "conceives the Company are indebted to me," for

" I [ie Guilding] volunteered my services to command the next party [ie after previous expeditions had failed] ... we were successful in fully discovering this Noble River ... a circumstance of the highest importance ... to the future interests of the Australian Agricultural Company".¹⁶

In regard to the selection of his grant he pointed out that he "long ago" had been given permission to select land to the north of the Company grant and that the Company's craft was not absolutely instrumental in discovering this land for him, for he could have "repaired to Port Macquarie" which was only one day's journey from the Manning and have been equally as successful.¹⁷

The selection "Head 9th: Settlement on the Manning" of Dawson's report further pointed out the advantages of the expedition, Guilding and settlement on the Manning for the A.A. Co. Through-out this Dawson emphasised his concern for the "future interests of the A.A. Co.", particularly so when he speaks of Guilding. Dawson indicated that the encouragement of Guilding's settlement was extremely advantageous to the Company as

"...the objects of his [Guilding's] pursuits possess in my mind much interest with reference to the future prospects of the Company..."¹⁸

If Guilding was to succeed in his pursuits, Dawson noted, "it may be a subject for consideration [to follow] ... his example in the cultivation of certain productions." If, instead, he failed due to climatic difficulties and so forth, then "no experiments need to be attempted by us [that is the Company]".¹⁹ From this it appears that Dawson sent the expedition not for personal interest, nor for Guilding's benefit, but, as Armstrong admitted, "to survey and explore" the area. Furthermore, Guilding was to be more advantageous to the A.A. Co. than they were instrumental to him.²⁰

The land expedition, led by a Mr. Macleod and conducted at the same time as the sea expedition, was designed to survey the land on the southern bank (that is, the northern part of the Company's grant) and to establish a possible line of communication between Port Stephens and the Manning River. Macleod's journal gave Dawson the

"opinion, that it is continuously the finest and most extensive Sheep Country on the Company's grant, and ought to be settled as early as practicable."²¹

Dawson thus suggested the establishment initially of cattle stations, preceding the formation of sheep stations, in the Manning area of the Company's grant. Even though these plans were not approved by the colonial Committee, Dawson commenced the building of a road to the Manning River from Port Stephens. This prompted the Committee to accuse Dawson of establishing a

"... line of communication ... very valuable to the new settlers on the Northern [bank] but ... without object [for] the immediate views of the Company."²²

The arguments of Dawson and Guilding, regarding the sea expedition in particular (which refute the accusations to some extent), are quite plausible. However, once Guilding was settled at his grant, "Jamaica Plains" on a Manning River tributary it becomes difficult to explain Dawson's actions in sanctioning the supplying of Guilding with A.A. Co. articles and labour. The accusations of this began with the initial expeditions and were evidenced repeatedly up to Dawson's dismissal.

James Macarthur, on 19th September, 1828 charged that the fitting out and conducting of the sea expedition was

“altogether at the Company’s expense.”²³ This was confirmed by Mr. Robinson’s (a Company Clerk) statement of 18 March 1828. In it he claimed that both the sea and land expeditions

“were in every respect fitted out at the Company’s cost – that Mr. Guilding directed the loading of the Vessel.”²⁴

If these expeditions were, as Dawson and Guilding propounded, for the purpose of “discovery and survey”, greatly beneficial to the Company, then it could be expected that they be fitted out at the A.A. Co’s cost. Dawson’s argument however, tends to be doubted when it is noted “that part of the railway intended for the [Company’s] Coal Establishment was . . . landed upon Mr. Guilding’s grant”²⁵ along with “Harness Casks, etc which . . . were not returned to the settlement”²⁶ and that the vessel was also carrying Guilding’s sugar rollers and seedling. If, as the Committee claimed, the expeditions were chiefly on the individual accounts of Mr. Guilding and Mr. Dawson then the Company goods had been used wrongfully.

In respect to the supplying of Guilding during and after the settlement of Jamaica Plains with AACo. goods and services, as the Committee noted on 7 January 1829:

“. . . there is not one word in contradiction of this serious breach of duty . . . the indisputable fact still remains that Mr. Dawson gave his sanction and authority for the Valuable Labour of the Company’s Mechanics being diverted to the personal objects of an Individual unconnected with the Company, but now known as Mr. Dawson’s friend.”²⁷

To worsen this situation the lists of articles of goods to be made for Guilding embraced almost every necessary commodity for an initial establishment and, the Committee noted, were “of the same general character and description as must have been wanting for the use of the Company’s own Establishment.”²⁸ Furthermore, Guilding also used the Company vessels to convey “at sundry times” the Company provisions and manufactured articles to his Manning River settlement.

It was further claimed (addenda 27 March 1828) “that the Company’s men (six) were engaged in the cultivation of Mr. Guilding’s grant . . .” and that a free man (Palmer) was generally employed by Guilding while his wages were paid by a draft upon the Company which was made out by Guilding and signed by Dawson.²⁹ Hugh Mackay, a free person employed by Guilding as superintendent was also paid by the A.A. Co, but in a less obvious manner.

Dawson employed him also as clerk of the Company stores at Carrabean, at a salary of 50 pounds per year, with rations, even though he was almost totally incompetent to the duties of clerk. Upon his leaving the Port Stephens enterprise to accompany Guilding to Jamaica Plains Mackay was paid the balance of the salary due to him and he obtained a large amount of clothing from the Company stores.³⁰

The state of accounts at the Carrabean storehouse was also focused on by the Committee and particularly the unlimited access Guilding and Mackay had to it. For instance, Robinson claimed that

“Mr. Guilding and his Agent Mackay had free and constant access to the Company’s Store and that articles were supplied to them without any account being taken of them.”³¹

No abstract accounts of receipts and deliveries were kept, nor any check against the misappropriation of the Company’s property, especially whilst Mackay was employed as clerk. Instead, it was:

“. . . mere memoranda, without form or information of the purpose [of

the articles]; some of them [were] written in pencil and . . . consequently likely to be obliterated in a short time."³²

Combined with this lack of accounting was the fact that different craftsmen executed different and separate orders for Guilding, often without the knowledge of a Company clerk or overseer. Consequently, this means "that the articles delivered to Mr. Guilding and to his agent [are] not known to the full extent."³³ The Committee, in their reports, implied a vast amount was diverted to Jamaica Plains. Guilding, on the contrary, claimed them to be a

"few trumpery articles . . . no more than what I myself, or any other private individual would willingly have afforded to any new immigrant fixing themselves in our neighbourhood."³⁴

He positively denied the charge of receiving extraordinary favours from Dawson as Agent of the Company and pointed out that he would, naturally, "cheerfully repay" the A.A. Co. The Committee, however, were not "willing to receive as any palliation for this sacrifice of public principle and duty . . . that these article were to be paid for, "particularly as there was no satisfactory account of the articles supplied to enable their value to be calculated."³⁵

Dawson was charged not only with diverting A.A. Co. goods and services away from the Company grant, but also of diverting his own interests and time towards a future grant for his family, also located on the north bank of the Manning River. James Macarthur reported on 13 March 1828 that

". . . a place was shewn [sic] me . . . of the shores of [the Manning] River on which a tract of 1600 acres was pencilled off upon the North Banks and marked "Dawson".³⁶

As evidence of this Oxley informed James Macarthur that Dawson had written to him requesting his assistance in procuring a large tract of land, upon the north bank of the Manning for his eldest son and his brother, and referring him to Guilding for further information.³⁷

The original letter was lost at Port Stephens, where Dawson acknowledged it again came into his possession. He furnished what he termed a copy of it, but this was done in ignorance of the existence of a copy of the original, taken by Macarthur. In both Dawson spoke of his intention to secure a home for his family in New South Wales - which the Committee saw as a failure to fully devote himself to the A.A. Co. It was on this topic of loyalty to the Company that the two letters differed. In the original copy Dawson had stated:

"I have not the most remote idea of quitting the Company's service nor devoting any portion of my time to private concerns beyond reflections and such arrangements as everyone must be aware a Husband, and Father is bound to do, and will do, wherever he is."³⁸

In the second letter, however, he did not equate family interests with Company concerns and simply declared "I have not the most remote idea of devoting any portion of my time to any but the Company's Affairs,"³⁹ and added later that he felt it was his "bounden duty" to provide for the female part of his family in the event of his death.

This professed loyalty to the Company was to a certain extent contradicted by Guilding's letters to Dawson. In his first letter, dated 17 April, 1828, Guilding speaks of his desire to have Dawson and his family ". . . comfortably settled on the fine plains I have selected for you",⁴⁰ and in his second letter, also dated 17 April, 1828 he advised Dawson to

". . . continue in the Company's service

so long as it is agreeable – and in
the meantime provide an independent
home for yourself and your family.”⁴¹

In these sentences, then, Guilding inadvertently supplied incriminating evidence against his benefactor. Guilding enhanced the Committee’s opinion that Dawson had little regard for the Company and was using Company time and resources to further his personal interests. However, if one is to take note of these sentences, one must also take cognizance of Guildings opinion as expressed in his first (and more personal) letter:

“...it is a pretty farce, their [that is, the
Committee] pretending to find fault with
your management of the company’s concerns, the
fact is you have been too good a Servant to
the Company. Some men would have
made their fortunes out of them
without paying anything like the
sedulous attention you have to their
interests.”⁴²

Although this does not exonerate Dawson, for he obviously was guilty of the charges made against him in relation to Guilding and his personal interest on the Manning River, it does prove that he had also been concerned with the Company interests.

It is difficult to make a conclusive statement about Dawson’s true motives in sending the two expeditions to the Manning River in October 1827. It appears, however, that once the expeditions had established the value of the land surrounding the Manning River, Dawson’s interest in the area was at least partially motivated by his personal interests, as was the establishment of Guilding as his future neighbour. From this essay it can be seen that the charges made against Dawson in relation to the “Manning River Affair” were made with the backing of sound evidence against him. Yet when the extent of the Committee’s culpability is recalled the unanswerable question is raised – were Dawson’s personal interests so seriously damaging to the A.A. Co., or was the Committee exaggerating in an attempt to cover their own serious misdeeds?

EPILOGUE

Dawson was officially dismissed by the London court of directors in January, 1829. Having returned to England late in 1828, he published a rebuttal of the accusations in his “Statement of the Services of Mr. Dawson, as chief agent of the Australian Agricultural Company” and continued to press for justice, though a full hearing was never granted to him.

Evenso he remained interested in Australia, publishing “The Present State of Australia; a Description of the Country, its Advantages and Prospects with reference to Emigration: and a particular account of its aboriginal inhabitants” in 1830, and returning in 1839 to N.S.W., where he had been granted land in 1836 in recompense for the grant he had sought unsuccessfully from Darling in 1828. He was reappointed magistrate for the Hunter area, where he remained until 1862, when he returned to England, dying four years later.⁴³

By the beginning of 1830, Guilding had lost his Manning River Estate on foreclosure of a mortgage and had left his cattle station in charge of his overseer.⁴⁴ Ironically his grant later passed to William Charles Wentworth – one of the colonists who had originally begrudged Guilding’s settlement.⁴⁵

FOOTNOTES:

1. [The] Australian Encyclopedia, Volume 1, 1977, p.202
2. Despatches of The Australian Agricultural Company, 1824 – 1875, University of Newcastle Archives, Correspondence A No. AB5369”, Inclosure No.10”
3. “Report from the Committee, with reference to Mr. Dawson, 7 January 1828” Ibid, p.461
4. Despatches of the Australian Agricultural Company, 1824 - 1875, University of Newcastle Archives, Correspondence B1, No. AB5370; p. 352
5. It must be noted here that although it was Dawson who applied for this area to be legally surveyed to determine the Company boundaries, this was done on the recommendation and ratification of the move by the local Committee. They had rejected the more fertile Liverpool Plains area and on inadequate and inaccurate knowledge selected the locality closest to a navigatable port.
6. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1, 1788 - 1850 p.299 This was particularly vexatious to the Committee as most of the sheep that the Company bought locally were from members of the Committee.
7. For more detailed work on this part of the accusations against Dawson, See Ken Kennedy “The Australian Agricultural Company” in Student Research Papers in Early Australian History, University of Newcastle, 1976 Pp 20 – 28
8. Australian Dictionary of Biography, op.cit., p.300
9. B.W. Champion “Sir Edward Parry”, Newcastle and Hunter District Historical Society Journal, Vol.3, June 1949 p.1
10. Kennedy, op.cit., p.26 also
J. Gregson, “The Australian Agricultural Company” 1824 – 1875, Sydney, 1907, p.43
11. “Report from the Committee, 7 January, 1828” op.cit. p.462
12. “Minutes of Evidence, repecting part of the Conduct of Mr. Dawson, 27 February, 1828” Despatches of the A.A.Co. Correspondence B2, No. AB5371, p.711
13. “Minutes of the meeting of Proprietors, Sydney 21 March 1828”, Despatches Correspondence B1, op.cit. p.423
14. “Journal of an Expedition to the River Manning [by Armstrong]” “Despatches, Correspondence B2, op.cit., p.577
15. “Report from the Committee, 7 January 1828” op.cit., p.467
16. “Mr. John Guilding to Mr. Dawson, 17 April, 1828” 2nd Letter, Despatches Correspondence B2, op.cit., p.770
17. Ibid. p.771
18. “Report Mr. R. Dawson to Ja^s Macarthur, Esq., 31 January, 1828” Despatches Correspondence A, op.cit., p.485
19. Ibid., p.486
20. “Minutes of Evidence, 27 February 1828” op.cit., p.711
21. “Report: Mr. R. Dawson, 31 January, 1828” op.cit., p.484
22. “Report from the Committee, 7 January, 1828” op.cit., p.467
23. “Verbal Information given by Mr. James Macarthur at the Court of Directors, held on 19 September, 1828” Despatches, Correspondence A op.cit., p.416
24. “Evidence supplied by Mr. Robinson, 18 March 1828 Despatches Correspondence B2, op.cit., p.716
25. “Minutes of Evidence, 27 February 1828”, op.cit., p.711
26. “Evidence supplied by Mr. Robinson” op.cit., p.717
27. “Report from the Committee, 7 January, 1828” op.cit., P.461
28. Ibid, p.465
29. “Addenda, 27 March 1828” Despatches Correspondence B2 op.cit., p.723
30. “Evidence supplied by Mr. Robinson” op.cit., p.715
31. Ibid. p.718
32. “Mr. Barton to the Colonial Committee, Suggestions for plans of keeping future accounts, Sydney 18 August, 1828” Despatches Correspondence B2, op.cit., p.968

33. "Minutes of Evidence , 27 February 1828", op.cit., p.711
34. "Mr. John Guilding to Mr. Dawson, 17 April, 1828, 2nd letter" op.cit., p.769
35. "Report from the Committee, 7 January 1828" op.cit., P.461
36. "Mr. James Macarthur to the Comimittee of Management" 13 March 1828" Despatches Correspondence B2 op.cit.
p. 528
37. "Report from the Committee, 7 January 1828" op.cit., p.468
38. "Dawson to Oxley – by the original as copied by Mr. Macarthur" Despatches Correspondence A. op.cit.,
pp470 – 471
39. "Dawson to Oxley - by the copy supplied by Mr. Dawson" Despatches Correspondence A op.cit., p.469
40. "Mr. John Guilding to Mr. Dawson, 17 April, 1828 – First letter" Despatches Correspondence B2, op.cit.,
p.762
41. "Mr. John Guilding to Mr. Dawson, 2nd letter", op.cit., p.764
42. "Mr. John Guilding to Mr. Dawson, First letter" op.cit. p.764
43. Australian Dictionary of Biography, op.cit., pp299 – 300
44. William Kieth Birrell, "The Manning Valley, New South Wales. A Study in Landscape change 1824 – 1900"
University of Newcastle, 1970. p.96
45. Taree: A Short Factual History (anonymous) P.3

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