

Cradle of the Commonwealth

Extract (including footnotes) from an article entitled "Cradle of the Commonwealth" by John Barlow F.I.A. printed in "The Red Funnel" Vol.1. No.1. August 1905, produced by Union Steamship Company of New Zealand.

Extracted by Julie Stokes, June 1999

The peninsula between the present Circular Quay and Darling Harbour, from Argyle Street to Dawes Point, was a fashionable residential portion of the city in those days (60 years ago), and here the old-time merchants lived at ease in spacious houses, with gardens overlooking the harbour, and within hail of their trading-ships and whalers that thronged to the wharves below them. But, as of old, Lazarus sat again at the gate of Dives, for immediately adjoining these pleasant homes dwelt the workers and the poor of the city. The region inhabited by them - still known as The Rocks - extended from the present Argyle Street along George Street to Charlotte Place, and it had Upper Fort Street and Princes Street as its western-most boundaries. Even here, in what is now an unsystematic network of mean streets and crooked lanes, were many good houses and comfortable cottages, with trees and garden-ground about them; but the proximity of the Gaol, and the existence of numerous taverns where sailors foregathered, must have made the neighbourhood in the early days an extremely undesirable one. For the hangman might then be often seen publicly performing his ghastly work¹; and the position of the old Gaol made it possible, for those who so wished, to obtain an excellent view of the proceedings. It was situated at the foot of a cliff below Harrington Street, and ran from Essex Street along George Street, to about 50 yards from the present Little Essex Street. Above it, on the western side, rose the eminence that was for many years known as Gallows Hill. Harrington Street at the time did not exist, and the rocky tiers that then occupied the space between the Gaol wall and Gloucester Street formed an ideal vantage ground for absorbing excitement of noting the bearing of the chief actors in a familiar tragedy; the movements of the hangman as he busied himself with the brief preliminaries of the scaffold; - and suddenly a lifeless form dangling black at the end of a rope in the early morning.

Many of the men whose names are foremost in Australian history were born, or lived during their early days, in or about this vicinity.

In No. 36 Cumberland Street lived Dr. Broughton, the first Bishop of Australia. This house - originally built by Robert Campbell - was afterwards occupied by Dr. Mitchell, the father of Mr. D.S. Mitchell, to whose munificence New South Wales owes the possession of an almost priceless collection of books, chiefly relating to Australia. In the next house, No. 37, Sir William Burton (a Judge of the Supreme Court) resided. Captain Innes, father of the late Judge Innes, lived in one of the large stone houses known as Miles's Buildings. Conrad Martens, the artist, is also said to have lived in one of these buildings. Next to them stands Lincoln house, at one time occupied by Mrs. Aspinnall. In Fort Street, where Milton Terrace now stands, were the residences of Captain Simpson (father of the well-known Judge G.B. Simpson), Sir Ralph Gore, Robert Campbell, and Thomas Walker, afterwards of Concord, who founded, built and endowed the Walker convalescent Home on the Parramatta River. Spencer Lodge, at Miller's Point, was the home of Captain Lamb of Parbury, Lamb & Co. Captain "Bobby" Towns lived where Moorecliffe Hospital now stands. His house

came afterwards into the possession of the late Hon. Henry Moore. Next to the three old houses in Merriman Street, known as "Narrara", "D'Alroy" and "Rothsay" - built by "Johnny" Jones, a ship-owner and whaling captain - stood "Jack the Miller's" windmill, from which the Point derived its name. Mrs. Brown's "Seminary for Young Ladies" was also in Merriman Street, and had a very aristocratic list of patrons in those days. Another school well known in the early forties, was kept by John Russell at 181 Cumberland Street. Huxley, who was afterwards to become one of the most distinguished men of his time, but who in 1846 was only the assistant-surgeon on *H.M.S. Rattlesnake*, somewhere in this locality first met the lady who was afterwards to become his wife - Miss Henrietta Ann Heathorn - at the house of her sister, Mrs Fanning, "the wife of one of the leading merchants of the town." He was married to her in London eight years afterwards. The late Right Hon. W.B. Dalley, P.C., was born in No. 67 Princes Street, and Sir George Dibbs in Upper Fort Street, in a house only recently demolished. On The Rocks, at No. 32 Cambridge Street, lived a Mrs Flaherty, who kept the Erin-go-Bragh Inn, and with her a little boy who, the old residents say, attended a school at Cockle Bay - as Darling Harbour was then called - and "looked after a donkey for his keep". That boy, by sheer force of intellect, afterwards became a brilliant lawyer and notable politician, and, as Sir James Martin, will be known to history as the first Australian-born Chief Justice of New South Wales. W.B. Dalley, Daniel Henry Denihey, and other prominent men, it is said, also received their early education at the Cockle Bay School. There are still a few residents of The Rocks who remember hearing Wentworth advocate Constitutional Government from the balcony of the old Black Boy - now the Ocean Wave - Hotel at the intersection of Gloucester and Little Essex Streets, though that is nearly seventy years ago. They remember too, the old electioneering fight on the Flagstaff Hill, when Captain Innes was chased by an infuriated mob, and only saved himself with difficulty; when Johny Jones's whalers armed themselves with knives and other weapons, and serious bloodshed was only averted by the soldiers being called out. And they will tell you of the marvellous amount of personation carried on at the elections in those days, when all sorts of changes of apparel were kept in the Brown Bear Inn in Brown Bear Laneⁱⁱ, to enable the enthusiastic, if not too scrupulous, elector to pluralise his vote; and of Sullivan, the political barber, who lived in Brown Bear Lane, and whose assistance in an electoral campaign of ultimate victory to the candidate fortunate enough to obtain it. Many such memories as these are attached to the old streets. They are slight in themselves, no doubt, but worthy of record, for the locality to which they refer is about to be re-modelled, and the work of demolition has begun. The Government considered it necessary, for sanitary reasons, during the plague year (1900) to resume the whole of The Rocks are, Dawes and Miller's Points, and the Darling Harbour wharves - about 150 acres altogether - at a cost of about three millions sterling.

ⁱ *In New South Wales, condemned criminals were hanged in public up til 1854.*

ⁱⁱ *Now Little Essex Street. The Brown Bear Inn was at the corner of Little Essex and Princes Streets.*