In the service of the company
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Letters of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company

Volume I: December 1829 – June 1832
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The Australian Agricultural Company's archives are listed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii
Preface by Professor Alan Atkinson iii
Introduction by Dr Pennie Pemberton vi
Note on transcript xii
Map 1 xiv

1. 1829: Letter A – C 1
2. 1830: Letter D – Letter No. 297 5
3. 1831: Letters Nos 298 – 550 219
4. 1832: Letters Nos 551 – 636 367

Index 423
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Sir Edward Parry’s letter books were deposited with the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (then the Australian National University Archives of Business and Labour) by the Australian Agricultural Company in 1955, and this volume is published with the company’s approval and support. We are also grateful to the Thyne Reid Charitable Trusts for a grant towards the conservation and transcription of the letter books.

The publication of Sir Edward Parry’s 1829–32 letter book makes its contents widely available for the first time. The original volume is extremely fragile, the binding having deteriorated and its brittle pages having suffered water damage many years ago, and it has not been possible to make the volume available for general use. Because of the fragility of the volume and the faded handwriting in light brown ink, transcription of the handwriting was a demanding task, ably undertaken by Dr Pennie Pemberton. Mary Paton, also of the Archives’ staff, assisted with the editing and the proofreading which required close attention to the many abbreviations and the erratic capitalisation.

Kim Morris of Art and Archival Pty Ltd undertook conservation work to stabilise the original volume, Barry Howarth produced the detailed index and Winifred Mumford drew the map which also appears in the 1932–34 volume. The ANU E Press team provided valuable production assistance.

Maggie Shapley
University Archivist
ANU Archives Program
PREFACE

The Australian Agricultural Company occupies a strange, halfway position in the story of Australian settlement. On the one hand it was just another large sample of free enterprise, similar to any number of others which have characterised Australia since the 1820s. On the other hand the Company’s early aspirations and experience cast a distinctive, sideways light on the whole business of colonisation.

Increasingly, towards the end of the twentieth century, Australian historians have been preoccupied with the story of the nation. A hopeful and enlightening move this may be in many ways. But we lose a little as well. In the first place, a concern with the nation as such means less interest in the way in which the various colonies began and evolved, each in its own right – their fundamental ideals, their methods of government and so forth. Even the foundations of democracy and of mass education during the second half of mid-nineteenth century seem less important now because they were colonial rather than national achievements.

In these circumstances it may be even more difficult to appreciate the significance of the Australian Agricultural Company as a colonising effort. Founded by an Act of the British Parliament in 1824 the Company followed very deliberately in the steps of those great chartered enterprises which had sent English capital and labour to several parts of North America – to Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Georgia – when that continent was, from an English perspective, a “wilderness”. But the A. A. Company itself set a precedent. It was one of several such enterprises designed for the frontier of settlement in Europe’s antipodes. The Van Diemen’s Land Company followed almost immediately. Both the A. A. Company and the V. D. L. Company took very large grants of land and their acreage made it hard for them to position themselves anywhere but at a distance from the colonial capitals. But there was a virtue also in isolation. Both were to be mini-colonies in their own right, subject to the governors in Sydney and in Hobart but ruled as well from boardrooms in London.
Some of the founders of settlement at Swan River, in Western Australia, hoped to use the same model. This scheme came unstuck, but its failure did not prevent the foundation of the South Australian Company as an essential part of the project at St Vincent Gulf in the mid 1830s – the “province” of South Australia. There too there was a peculiar tension, for a time, between the company’s little principality on Kangaroo Island and the governor in Adelaide. Finally, across the Tasman, the New Zealand Company was profoundly important in the settlement of New Zealand during the 1840s.

In each case the tug of war was not only one of rival authorities. It was also a matter of varying idealism. It would be wrong to be too starry-eyed about the altruistic hopes of the Australian Agricultural Company. As with all these enterprises, the main point was to make money. To some extent high-mindedness was a disguise, taken up in order to win friends in Parliament and to put as much pressure as possible on the Colonial Office in the argument for Crown land and convict labour. But there certainly was an understanding that the Company represented something unprecedented in the colonisation of the Australian mainland. It was designed to create in this country a new kind of workforce, and thus a new kind of population – moral, orderly and intelligent. It was a striking symptom of the kind of ambition which was now focussed on this part of the world. This was a chartered company backed by large official promises. It represented one aspect of a powerful combination of free and state enterprise, a combination characteristic of the period which followed the Napoleonic wars and one which may be too little understood in Australian history. Here, in some ways, was a curious echo of eighteenth-century mercantilism. But here too was the beginning of that tradition, so important for Australia, which made officialdom itself into something of an entrepreneur.

The Australian Agricultural Company thus offered an unusual challenge to the government in Sydney. The local committee which managed in the first years was the most powerful body which had ever existed in the colony, outside government. The commissioners which took over from the committee from 1829 were also important
men, though as the colony expanded they became gradually less obvious in the overall scheme of things. Sir Edward Parry, the first commissioner, was a particularly striking figure, a gentleman of title, certain of his own importance, highly intelligent and determined to make the Company a moral enterprise – a beacon of high-minded paternalism for the colony at large.

In some ways then, the early records of the Australian Agricultural Company have an importance for historians similar to Historical Records of New South Wales and the Historical Records of Australia. They do not have the same far-ranging significance, but as a core of official data they tell a similar story of order imposed and of idealism both realised and disappointed. In reading one by one the governor’s despatches, as they appear in HRNSW and HRA, it is possible to trace the unfolding of personality among leading figures as well as catching a little at least of the cross-currents of lesser lives. The same can be done with the records reproduced here.

This was government in the bush. The Company’s ambivalent character is frequently obvious – moneymaking is often overlaid in these documents with a sense of some larger purpose, or at least some larger dignity. In that way the official records of the Company not only say something about the early possibilities of government in Australia but also about the early possibilities of capitalism.

Alan Atkinson
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INTRODUCTION

Letters of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company, December 1829 – June 1832

The Australian Agricultural Company was formed in London in April 1824 to raise fine woolled sheep on a Crown Grant in the Colony of New South Wales. The labour-force was to consist mainly of assigned convicts, but the Company was to send out overseers, shepherds, mechanics and other servants, together with a supply of purebred Merino sheep, cattle and horses.

The first Company ‘Establishment’ sailed from England in June 1825 on the *York* and the *Brothers* — under the direction of the Company’s Agent, Robert Dawson. Dawson was to be supported in his endeavours by a Colonial Committee of Management composed of local shareholders. In the event, the members of the Committee were James Macarthur, Dr James Bowman and Hannibal Hawkins McArthur.

Soon after his arrival, in early 1826, Dawson made the decision to take up the whole of the Company’s one million acre grant between Port Stephens and the Manning River. The next two years were occupied with exploration and the establishment of the Company Settlement at Carrabean (later Carrington) on the northern shore of Port Stephens, No. 1 Farm (near Carrington), No. 2 Farm (Stroud), and a chain of sheep stations north towards the out-station at Gloucester.

Meanwhile, in London, the Company had been prevailed on to take over the coalmines at Newcastle, N.S.W. The Mining Establishment, under John Henderson, arrived aboard the *Australia* in November 1826. Through various misunderstandings between the Company, the Company’s Colonial Committee, the ‘Home Government’ (London) and the ‘Local Government’ (N.S.W.), the matter did not proceed, the differences being referred back to London for resolution.

Robert Dawson was dismissed by the Colonial Committee in April 1828. When the news was received in London, the Directors sought to appoint an authoritative Commissioner who could manage
their operations without an advisory Colonial Committee. Their choice was Captain William Edward Parry R.N. (1790-1855), then Hydrographer Royal. In 1829 he and John Franklin were knighted in recognition of their naval expeditions between 1817 and 1825 in the Canadian Arctic in search of the North West Passage.

Sir Edward Parry and his wife Isabella (née Stanley) arrived in New South Wales in December 1829 aboard the *William*. Parry’s brief was to restore and maintain due order in the Company’s establishments; to review the situation of the Company’s million acre Grant on the northern shores of Port Stephens and arrange an exchange of lands if necessary; and to negotiate further with the Colonial Government over the management of coal mines. By the time this volume opens, some matters had been resolved.

**The Land Grant**

It had been agreed that the eastern part of the Port Stephens Estate (around the Great Lakes) should be returned to the Crown and an area equivalent in size should be taken elsewhere. The consideration of land to the north of the Manning River and to the north-east (the Liverpool Plains and Peel River) occupied much of Parry’s time.

**The Coal Mines at Newcastle**

John Henderson, the Colliery Manager, returned to N.S.W. in the *Elizabeth* in April 1830, four months after Parry. He spent the next months exploring the area around the existing coalmines in Newcastle. By August 1830 Henderson had ascertained that a suitable seam of coal lay to the west of the town, and negotiations began for the land grant and the necessary labour. Parry was also involved in ascertaining the possibility of an export market for coal and establishing the ‘prime cost’ or price at which, under its ‘monopoly arrangements’, the Company was to supply coal to the Government.

**The Company’s Establishment**

*Officers*

Under Parry as Commissioner – based at Tahlee, near Carrington – the Company’s Establishment at Port Stephens was divided
into departments: Accounts (Accountant William Barton), Flocks (Superintendent Charles Hall), Cattle, and Stud (Superintendent Henry Hall, appointed in May 1830), Agriculture (Superintendent William Burnett, who accompanied Parry to N.S.W. in the William) and Works (Superintendent the Surveyor John Armstrong). Other officers included the Surgeon and Botanist, Dr James Edward Stacy, and Parry’s private secretary, Henry Darch.

William Barton, the Accountant, who had been the senior officer in N.S.W. before Parry’s arrival, proved a difficult man to deal with – devising ever increasingly complex accounting methods and maintaining that his authority came directly from the Directors in London. Finally, in July 1831 Barton and his family sailed for London where he was dismissed. He was followed in October 1831 by William Burnett who also proved unsatisfactory. Both Barton and Burnett returned to NSW in 1834.

**Indentured Servants**

Most of the overseers, and some of the shepherds and mechanics, were originally recruited in Europe – England, Scotland and Germany. They were collectively known as the ‘indentured servants’, from the ‘indentures’ or contracts they had signed to serve the Company for a fixed period, usually seven years. By 1831 many of these contracts were coming up for renewal or cancellation.

**Convicts/Assigned Servants**

Most of the Company’s shepherds, stockmen and labourers, were convicts otherwise termed ‘assigned servants’. Convicts had either a fixed term sentence (usually seven or 14 years) or Life. Other employees in this general category included:

- Ticket of leave men, that is convicts holding a ticket entitling them to a degree of freedom of occupation and lodging within a nominated district (such as Port Stephens) before the end of their sentence or obtaining a pardon, or
- Emancipists, that is former convicts whose terms had expired or who had obtained a pardon.

Obtaining sufficient numbers of convicts was a constant battle for the Company: the Board for the Assignment of Servants never had
sufficient newcomers to meet the increasing demand; nor even to replace those whose sentences were completed.

The indentured servants and emancipists were also generally categorised as ‘Free’ (F), the assigned servants and ticket-of-leave men as ‘Convict’ (C).

**Military Establishment**

Although a Justice of the Peace, Sir Edward Parry could not act in cases concerning Company servants, free or convict. These were matters for the Resident Magistrate, Captain Donelan and later Captain Moffatt, who headed the small military police establishment based at Port Stephens. The maintenance of the police establishment, the responsibility for payment of salaries and wages, and relations with the Company’s own convict constables were frequently the subject of correspondence.

**Colonial Shareholders**

The Company’s capital stock was divided into 10,000 shares, each to a nominal value of £100. As additional monies were needed, ‘calls’ were made on the shareholders. By 1830, ten calls had been made, totalling £21 per £100 share.

Two hundred shares had been reserved for offer to colonial shareholders, and the Commissioner was responsible for arranging the collection of the calls as they came due. By mid-1832, several of the original colonial shareholders had died (eg John Piper, John Oxley and Robert Campbell); others had transferred responsibility for call payments to their English agents (eg Alexander Berry, Thomas Icely and Matthew Hindson, William Walker and the Macarthsurs). Most of the remainder forfeited their shares through non-payment in 1834.

**Sales and Stores**

As far as possible, the Company sought to be self-contained. Annually, stores from colliery machinery to slop clothing, shoes and wool bales were dispatched from London on requisition.

At Port Stephens the Company attempted to raise its own grain and tobacco for rations – and such things as pit props for Newcastle. However, such self-sufficiency was never completely possible – and
In the service of the company

it was necessary to advertise for tenders of wheat and other staples, the sale of horses and cattle at the Maitland sales, and the services of the Company’s stallions. The Company’s wool clip was intended for the London auction houses. From the first it was necessary to advertise for additional shearsers, and for transport to convey the wool from Port Stephens to Sydney and thence to England. Many of these matters were handled through the Company’s agents in Sydney, the merchant house of George Bunn & Co.

The Company cutter *Lambton* (62 tons) had been purchased in Sydney from the New Zealand Company in March 1827. Under her master, James Corlette, she plied between Sydney and Port Stephens, occasionally via Newcastle. However, as a sailing ship, she could be unreliable in unfavourable weather.

After the establishment of the regular steamship service between Sydney and Maitland/Morpeth, Sir Edward Parry frequently used it for the prompt dispatch of mail, or to travel himself, especially when visiting Newcastle – riding from Tahlee to ‘Kinross’ (James Graham’s grant at the confluence of the Hunter and Williams Rivers – just below Raymond Terrace) where he boarded the steamer.

In 1834, on the completion of his term, Sir Edward Parry with his family returned to London aboard the *Persian*. He was succeeded as the Company’s Commissioner by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Dumaresq.

**The Archives of the Australian Agricultural Company**

The extensive archives of the Australian Agricultural Company, including the records of both the London and Australian head offices, have been deposited with the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (formerly the A.N.U. Archives of Business and Labour) since 1955.

Sir Edward Parry’s correspondence and record keeping as Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company was voluminous. In addition to the letters contained in these letterbooks, he wrote lengthy formal, usually monthly, Despatches to the Directors in England (NBAC reference 78/1), kept a Demi-Official Letter Book ([NBAC reference 1/2B], Order Books (of instructions to the Company’s Officers, Indentured and Assigned
Servants), and an official journal or diary (the diary is held by the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales).

The copies of Sir Edward’s letters written for recipients in New South Wales are contained in two leather-bound volumes, 36.5 cm x 23.5 cm (14” x 9”), containing 300 pages, feint-ruled (NBAC reference 1/38/1-2). The first volume covers the period 1829-1832, the second 1832-1834.

It would seem, from internal evidence, that Sir Edward (or J. Edward Ebsworth in Parry’s absence) would write the final draft of a letter into the copybook or amend an existing letter in pencil, from which Parry’s Secretary, Henry Darch, would write the final version ‘in a fair hand’.

The back of the first volume also contains entries for baptisms at Port Stephens between 1827 and July 1831. The children were subsequently received into the congregation at Christ Church, Newcastle. The entries were transcribed and published in Pure Merinos and Others (P. A. Pemberton, A.N.U. Archives of Business and Labour, Canberra) in 1986 and are available on the Noel Butlin Archives Centre web site.

Dr Pennie Pemberton
Canberra, July 2005
Note on transcription

All the letters are heavily – and inconsistently – abbreviated, with the frequent use of superscript letters. For ease of consultation, the following editorial changes have been made:

1. Some spelling has been standardised but some frequently used words have been left in their original form: eg Honorable, advertizement, favorable and expences.

2. All given names have been extended: Jno. to John; Geo. to George; Dl to Daniel; Benjm to Benjamin. Also Ausn to Australian, Commsy to Commissary &c.

3. ult, inst and prox have been extended to ultimo, instant and proximo respectively.

4. The names of newspapers and ships have been italicised.

5. Single inverted commas have been used for the names of horses, eg. ‘Cleveland’.

6. Double inverted commas “ ” have been used only for reported speech.

7. Abbreviations such as TL or TofL (Ticket of Leave); H. M. (His Majesty’s); H. E. (His Excellency [The Governor]) have been extended.

8. The capitalisation is erratic and has generally been left as in the original.

9. Additional punctuation – usually dashes – has been removed.

10. Place names have been left as spelled (see index for modern version). Surnames have been ‘corrected’ only if spelt incorrectly in one place and not another.

11. Sums of money and weights have been written in a standardised form.

12. Paragraph numbering has been retained in (semi-) official letters.

13. The usual method of referring to convicts (by their ship, ship’s voyage number and sentence) has been retained, eg James Goodwin, Guilford 7, 14 Years.
14. Letters which are unnumbered in the original document have been allocated numbers during transcription eg the unnumbered letter following Letter No. 3 is now Letter No. 3a. The first five letters are unnumbered in the original and have been named Letters A to E in the transcription.

15. (C) (for ‘Convict’) indicates assigned servants and ticket-of-leave men.
Map 1:  
Places mentioned in the text. *Modern place names are shown in bold type*