

DOROTHY READING

WEDNESDAY CLASS

I.00 - 3.00 p.m.

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY ESSAY: Background to Mr & Mrs Don MacLaren's life in the  
Hunter Region of West Wallsend and Morisset

Assignment extension - submitted 27/II/1987

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT ESSAY

A BACKGROUND TO MR & MRS DON MACLAREN'S LIFE IN THE HUNTER REGION OF

WEST WALLSEND AND MORISSET

During the last seventy five years there have been many changes throughout the world and in local areas such as the Hunter region. A link with the past is always available through talking with people who remember how things used to be. In particular, the West Wallsend and Morisset areas are of interest through one such link, Mr & Mrs Don MacLaren of Morisset. Don MacLaren and Alison Harley grew up in the little coal mining community of West Wallsend during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1937 they were married by Rev. Charles Mullins in West Wallsend's Presbyterian church. Six weeks later Mr MacLaren lost his job at the pit. The young couple had to seek work outside the Hunter region but approximately eighteen months later returned when Mr MacLaren was successful in getting onto the nursing staff at Morisset Hospital. They rented a cottage in the township of Morisset for twelve shillings and sixpence a week from a fortnightly pay of seven pounds eight shillings.

The development of the Hunter Valley region began with the discovery of coal at the mouth of the Hunter River in 1797 by Lieutenant J. Shortland. In due course a penal settlement was established to mine the coal, then came free settlers in 1820 "...which made it difficult for the government to retain Newcastle as a gaol and in 1824, following the removal of the convicts, it was declared a free town."<sup>1</sup> Free settlers moved further up the valley seeking better agricultural land. However coalmining was still to play a very important part in the development of Newcastle and the surrounding coal-bearing areas.

One such area was West Wallsend which was named after Wallsend in the United Kingdom. "Also, Wallsend coal was the best, so it was considered desirable to have some part of the name."<sup>2</sup> Early land grants were applied for as early as 1888. "Portions 98, 99 and 100 (Teralba Parish) encompass the present area of the town. The portions were applied for by George Henry and Mary Lane and gazetted to them on 11/4/1888. These portions passed into the hands of West Wallsend Coal Co. on 8/1/1889."<sup>3</sup> The first subdivisions occurred in 1886 and streets were named after local members of parliament. Up to that time the first settlers were on the fringe of the area, but after the establishment of the first

colliery, most of the settlers were miners and their families. The township developed because of the coal mining. "In July 1888 the West Wallsend Coal Co. colliery commenced production after some years of lead up work. The Monkwearmouth Coal Co. colliery also began producing in the area in March 1890 after four years of preparation. It became Seaham colliery in 1891-9. West Wallsend Extended (Killingworth) opened in 1892. Seaham No. 2 was opened in 1905. These four mines formed the economic basis of the town. West Wallsend Colliery closed in the mid 1920s; West Wallsend Extended (Killingworth) ceased production for 4 years in December 1910 after an explosion, and was closed indefinitely in 1930, but is now in operation again. Seaham No. 1 closed in 1932; and Seaham No. 2 in 1945." These closures obviously had a significant economic impact on the miners and their families including those of Mr & Mrs MacLaren. Mrs MacLaren remembers that people shared or bartered the things they had to spare, such as vegetables. Most people had gardens in those days. Mr MacLaren, as a young lad enjoyed gardening, and kept his mother supplied in vegetables to feed their family of seven. Mrs MacLaren's parents kept fowls and they sold the eggs to supplement low wages, or no wages! Despite the hard times, memories are of a happy, close-knit community.

Mrs MacLaren remembers that Friday night all the men got home early from the mines, she remembers her mother waiting so that she could take the dirty clothes to wash them before they had tea, and then all going down the street to shop as there was late night shopping. "Friday night was the night of the week, and all the children would be taken down to the main part of the town where the band played and the children were taken into the refreshment rooms where they were bought ice cream and sodas."<sup>4</sup>

Transport in the early days was horse powered then progressed to steam power. "A double-decker, open-topped horse bus, drawn by four horses carried passengers between Wallsend and West Wallsend. The colliery railway could also carry passengers on occasion. In 1910 a steam tram service replaced the horse bus to Wallsend, a distance of 7 miles."<sup>5</sup> The coal companies constructed their own private railways from West Wallsend to a junction with the main line near Cockle Creek. This line was used for passengers as well and was in service from September 1888 until 31st January 1930, Mrs MacLaren mentioned this service in her interview. She and her family went to Cockle Creek to meet her Scottish Grandparents, Mr & Mrs Sinclair when they came out from Scotland to live firstly at West Wallsend, then later to build a home at Kurri Kurri.

Mrs MacLaren used the steam tram from West Wallsend to Wallsend, then changed to an electric tram to Broadmeadow, when she went on to High School. The West Wallsend Public School was opened in November 1889, changing status many times over the years. Mrs MacLaren remembers playing in the Dolls Corner at the school which also had a rocking horse. Many years later her own daughter was to play in the Dolls Corner when she returned to live with her parents, Mr & Mrs Harley, while her husband was overseas. She helped her parents to run a boarding house until Mr MacLaren was released from a prisoner-of-war camp at the end of the Second World War.

West Wallsend Colliery used Strikebreakers during the 1888 General Strike. It was the first time on record that inexperienced men had worked on a coal face in the Newcastle district. They were protected from the miners on strike by a detachment of 50 red-coated artillery men with a Gatling field gun, and some 80 State police. The troopers and police arrived in the town on the first passenger train on the newly completed railway from Cockle Creek. The employment of the strikebreakers was terminated at the conclusion of the strike which lasted for several weeks.

The township which was built around mining had at times 80% of its working population employed in mining coal. "These days West Wallsend has a much wider economic base and only a fraction of its residents are mineworkers but the skeletal remains of poppet heads and mineworkings stand as a solid reminder of the past."<sup>6</sup> In a newspaper report on West Wallsend's centenary, an eighty two year old resident commented on early mining days, "The women carried a big burden because they were often left with the family when men went away looking for work...People were good to each other. We had a barter system operating so that if you had more of something than you needed people would gladly swap it for something you didn't have." This bears out much of what Mr & Mrs MacLaren spoke of in their interview.

During the year of 1938 Mr & Mrs MacLaren moved to live at Morisset, and Mr MacLaren commenced his nursing career at Morisset Hospital. Morisset is a township on the Western side of Lake Macquarie and <sup>in</sup> its early days was a timber town. It was named after James Morisset who was Commandant of Newcastle from 1818-1823. In April 1923 he made the first overland journey from Newcastle to Sydney, and camped overnight under a tree which was situated just east of the present Morisset Railway station. However there is a possibility that the



town was named after his son, E.N.V. Morisset who was superintendent of police at Bathurst, Maitland and Goulburn. Morisset was a Crown land subdivision made when the railway was being constructed in 1886-7. There were many buyers for early subdivision allotments. By 1887 a few homes were already occupied. The township was proclaimed on 3rd December, 1887 and was bounded by streets now known as Kilaben, Stockton, Awaba, Bridge, Wharf, Toronto, Temarang, Park and Ourimbah.<sup>8</sup>

The first two industries established were sawmilling, and the building of a functional railway. The sawmills were situated near the railway to make transport easier. Logs were brought by bullock dray from a wide area, many from the Wattagan Mountains. "On October 7, 1887, the surveyor reported: 'Morisset is a village divided by the Homebush-Waratah railway and is situated midway between Newcastle and Gosford, places about 52 miles apart.'<sup>9</sup> Morisset is 26 miles south of Newcastle. "Mr H.B. Mullard opened his first sawmill in Morisset in the 1890s. The mill used to manufacture wheels and general accessories for sulkies. Many of his products were exported to China as was a great deal of Morisset timber. Timber export boomed in the Western Lake Macquarie after the opening of the railway line through Morisset. Mullard's sawmill was located in Bridge Street, opposite the site of the Uniting Church today."<sup>10</sup> It was also near this church that Mr & Mrs MacLaren rented their first home in Morisset. A Post Office was established in 1888, a Public School in 1891 and the Police Station in 1902. The early settlers of Morisset were mainly fettlers or timber workers and their families. The establishment of a large mental hospital near Morisset in the early 1900s gave employment opportunities to many of the unemployed workers within the area.

"Around the turn of the century there was pressure upon the Government to build an extra country mental hospital to relieve overcrowding in Sydney Hospital. Also there was a strong movement by the residents of Newcastle to have the 'Newcastle Hospital for the Insane' moved out of the centre of the City. So in 1900, 1300 acres of land was acquired on the shores of Lake Macquarie, east of Morisset for the purpose of building an asylum for the insane. Clearing and construction work commenced in 1906. First thing constructed was a jetty because much of the building material was brought by boat. Next a dam was constructed to supply water for the hospital. The first ward was completed early in 1909 and the first patients arrived on the 9th May, 1909. They were all male. The intention was for the hospital to be a farming institution so mainly able-bodied chronic male patients were brought here."<sup>11</sup>

A description of the proposed hospital appeared in the Newcastle Morning Herald in November 1908 and read:

Messrs Southon Brothers of Waratah, the contractors, have commenced at Morisset on the grounds of the Hospital for Insane, the erection of of the recreation blocks in connection with the institution. The blocks will be ornate and substantial in character, one story in height, resting on solid concrete foundations. The material used in construction will be Wallsend bricks, Sydney stone dressings, and shingle tyled roof, also tower or what is known in the trade as a "fleeche" to be covered with copper, worked with ornamental design. The accommodation in the blocks will comprise reading room, 76ft by 40ft: billiard room, 45ft by 35ft: library, 45ft by 35ft: as well as smaller rooms for offices etc., all to be comfortable, well lighted, and ventilated. Provision is also to be made for hot water apparatus, fittings for gas supply, and perfect system of drainage. The flushing of the latter as well as the supply for the institution will be water pumped from a dam on the grounds of the institution, and from thence conveyed a distance of three miles by six inch main. The blocks when completed are to be fitted temporarily for kitchen purposes. It is expected that the pavilion or first portion of the main hospital will be ready for patients in a few months. This is apart from Messrs Southon's work, their contract alone being one of £5000. The site is about three miles from Morisset Railway Station, on a gravel road thereto being now in course of construction. <sup>I2</sup>

From a report of the Inspector General of Mental Hospitals in 1909 it was stated that "The new hospital for chronics at Morisset has begun and a Ward has been occupied. There are now 78 male patients on the register at Morisset and Mr Edwards has been placed in charge." <sup>I3</sup> By 1910 two more wards were nearing completion and plans for other wards and an Administrative Building were in an advanced stage. "The patient population is now 157 males. Temporary calico dormitories for the patients are being erected at Morisset. These are constructed of wooden frames with calico side panels, wooden floors and a canvas ply over all. Those is use are very comfortable and provide suitable accommodation for a considerable number of patients." <sup>I4</sup>

In 1930 the Inspector General reported that land had been set aside at Morisset for the establishment of a Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Construction commenced in 1933 and in 1936 the new Ward was opened and occupied by patients transferred from Paramatta.

Extensions to the hospital continued over the years until a hold up of all construction occurred due to a lack of funds at the outbreak of World War II. The war also interrupted Mr MacLaren's nursing career when he enlisted from Morisset and entered the army in 1940. Mrs MacLaren and her baby daughter returned to live with her parents at West Wallsend during the war while Mr MacLaren was overseas.

When Singapore fell, Mr MacLaren was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese and sent to Burma where prisoners were made to work on the Burma Railway. Mr MacLaren did not work on the railway but in the camp hospital. He helped to build the huge huts which were one hundred metres long. The beds were constructed from split bamboo slats with a roof of thatched palms. He was put in charge of one of these huts which contained two hundred sick soldiers suffering from dysentery, typhoid and other illnesses. It was nothing for him to carry five or six dead soldiers out of the huts each morning and lay them on the grass outside the hut to be taken away for burning. They could not bury the bodies for fear of contaminating the water supplies. He spent four years in that camp.

When the war was over Mr MacLaren resumed his nursing at Morisset Hospital. He spent time in charge of each section of that hospital during the course of his career and eventually second in charge of nursing at the hospital. By that time women were also being admitted and wards were built to accommodate them. Mr MacLaren said that the hospital was practically self sufficient for it had a farm with piggery, dairy, workshop and vegetable garden. As well, the grounds were beautifully kept with sweeping lawns and garden beds of all types of flowers. Fund-raising fetes also proved to be social occasions not only for the inmates but for the population of Morisset and district as well.

The hospital population rose steadily from 552 in 1927 to 1170 in 1940 and then the rate of increase slowed down when the war prevented any building projects. There was another burst of building activity in the 1950s and the population again began to increase until it reached its highest peak in late 1963 of 1490.<sup>15</sup>

Mr MacLaren was transferred to Ryde Psychiatric Hospital in 1957 to take charge of that hospital's first patients. He continued his nursing career there for nine and a half years before retiring due to ill health. He and his wife returned once more to live at Morisset in 1967. This year, 1987 marks their Golden Wedding Anniversary. This year also marks West Wallsend's centenary, the small town where this fine couple grew up and began married life.

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END NOTES

- I. J. C. Docherty, Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City, Sydney, 1983, p.I
2. L. Nilsen (Ed.), Lake Macquarie Past and Present, Newcastle, 1985, p.98
3. Ibid.
4. As told by Mrs MacLaren.
5. Nilsen, Lake Macquarie..... p.98
6. The Newcastle Herald, October 3, 1987.
7. Ibid.
8. Nilsen, Lake Macquarie..... p.69.
9. Newspaper cutting, unidentified, Morisset High School Library.
10. Newcastle Herald, October 5, 1978.
11. 'A Short Summary of Morisset Hospital 1909-1976', booklet produced by Morisset Hospital, Morisset Hospital Library, p.I.
12. Newcastle Herald, November 11, 1908, Morisset Hospital Library.
13. 'Morisset Hospital - Some Historical Notes Extracted from the Reports of The Inspector General of Mental Hospitals 1900 to 1939', Morisset Hospital Library.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.



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Docherty, J. C., Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City, Sydney, 1983.

Nilsen, L. (Ed.) Lake Macquarie Past and Present, Newcastle, 1985.

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Newcastle Herald

Unidentified newspaper cutting, Morisset High School Library