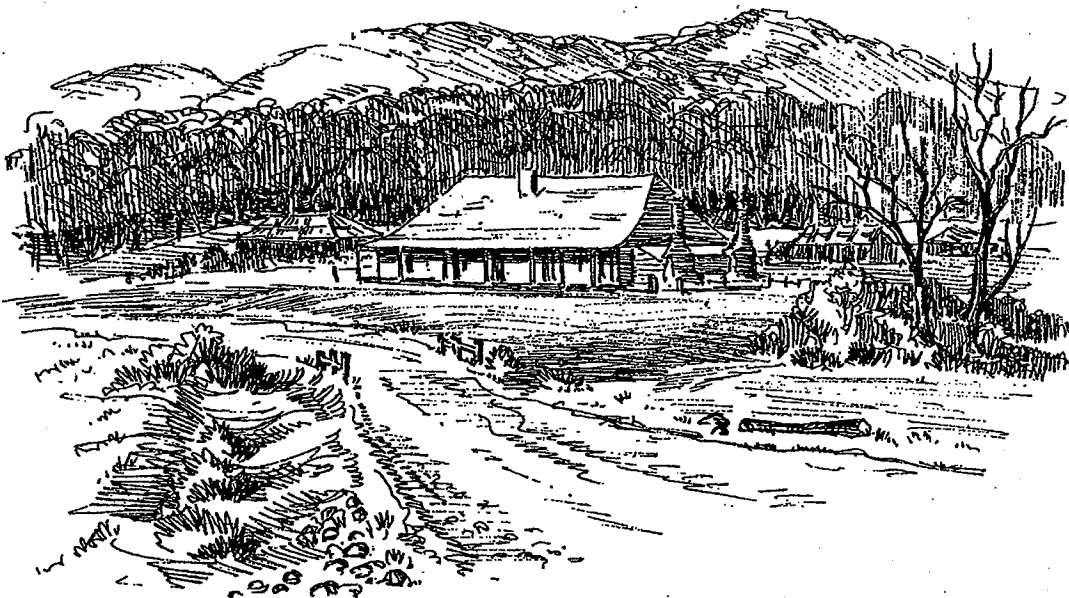


GEORGE COX OF MULGOA AND MUDGEES

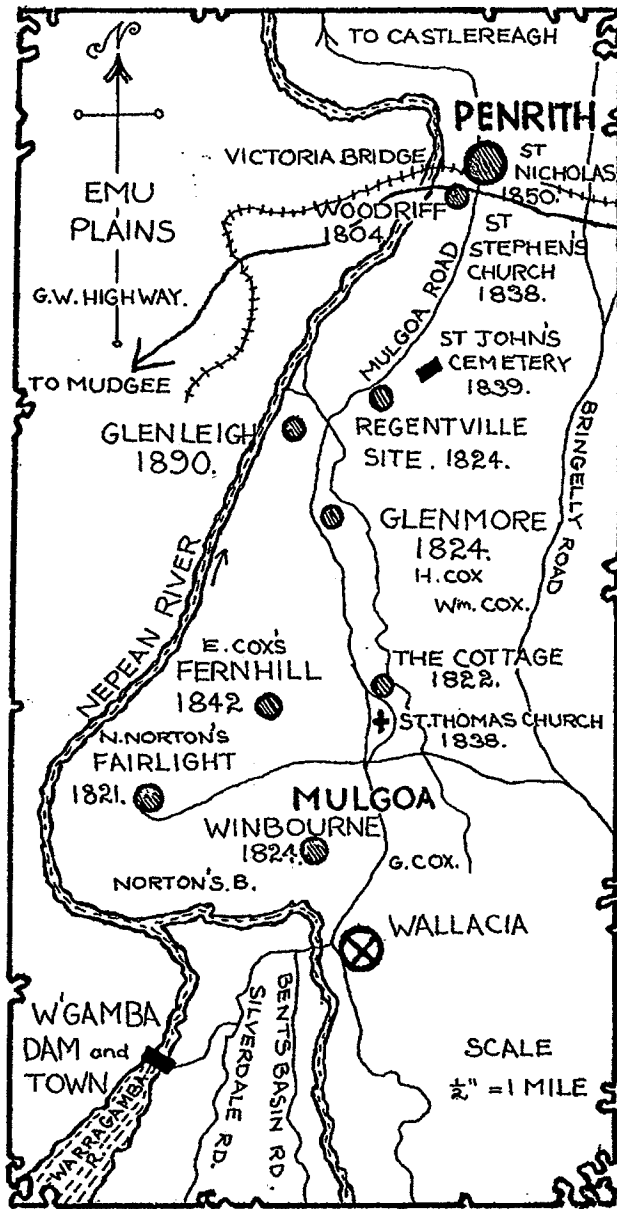
Letters to his sons
1846-49

Notes by Edna Hickson

Illustrations by Jill Francis



CROWN RIDGE INN FROM A SKETCH BY C. MARTENS
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Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Mitchell Library for permitting us to publish George's letters, and to use Conrad Martens' picture of the Inn at Crown Ridge.

Most of the information about early Burrundulla and Mudgee is from the G. H. F. Cox papers now in the Mitchell Library. G. H. F. was George Henry's eldest son, and compiled the papers in the early 1900s.

Many thanks to Mrs Prudence Watson for permission to use sketches from the scrap-book of her grandmother, Una White, George's youngest daughter.

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INTRODUCTION

These letters of George Cox cannot but be seen as important historical documents revealing a great deal of original information about the way of life and local events during the period which they cover. Their author moved unobtrusively through the history of the period, yet in reality was a person of not inconsiderable historical importance. As a young man he was amongst those who originally explored the Cudgegong River area and contributed to opening it up to settlement at a time when the extension of grazing beyond the County of Cumberland had become imperative. Later he took an active part in tracing and having made trafficable the best line of road from Mudgee to Sydney; and his contribution to developments in the improvement of sheep handling and wool production was not without significance.

But over and above these considerations, the letters are most engaging because of the portrayal they afford of a notably attractive personality; a person of lively interest in the world about him, of warmth, humour, sympathy and humaneness. In these letters we are given an intimate view of George Cox in his tender and tolerant affection for his family, his concern for his employees, his kindness for and comradeship with his horses (those faithful companions on his lonely journeys between Burrundulla and Winbourne), his loving attention to such details as suitable plants for the garden at Burrundulla or the protection from frost of his grapes at Winbourne and in the other multifarious details of a vital and active rural life. They have much of the quality of the best of the diarists.

We should be deeply grateful to members of the Cox family for providing us with such a fascinating glimpse of people, life and times of our earlier history, and most of all for the presentation of George Cox himself.

JUDGE COLMAN WALL



GEORGE COX.

These letters turned up some years ago during a spring clean in the office at Burrundulla where they had apparently lain undisturbed for over one hundred years. The earliest letter is dated 8th February 1846, and the last 19th January 1867. Why some letters have been kept and not others we will never know. Sometimes they follow each other week by week and at other times there are very long gaps, sometimes years.

They were written by George Cox from his home, Winbourne, in the Mulgoa valley, about forty miles from Sydney on the Nepean River, to his eldest son George Henry, who at twenty-one had shortly before gone to Mudgee to manage the property there. Only the letters written in the 1840s have been used in this collection. The continuity is reasonably good, and most of the family were still at Winbourne. The forties themselves were interesting years. It was the first decade after the end of transportation, and the last before the discovery of gold and the subsequent population explosion. It was in fact a brief hiatus between the time when the Colony was a mere penal settlement and when, almost overnight, it became an El Dorado.

The 1840s saw the first really serious depression in the Colony. The price of wool and stock came tumbling down, the Bank of Australia failed, and to top it all a severe drought set in. As one newspaper of the period put it, "The whole of our prosperity has vanished like the dream of a drunkard." It is claimed that as many as six hundred people went bankrupt in a single year. George's battle with the depression, the drought, and the failure of the Bank, is the theme of many of these letters.

George was the fourth son of William Cox, the man whom Governor Macquarie appointed to supervise the making of the road over the Blue Mountains to Bathurst in 1814. He married Eliza Bell, a daughter of Archibald Bell of Belmont, Richmond, in St Matthew's Church, Windsor, in 1822. Their first home was in The Cottage (originally called Fernhills) near St Thomas' Church, Mulgoa, but soon afterwards he built Winbourne near by. It was a single storey house built of stone quarried on the property. However, in 1840 when nine of their eleven children had been born, he was forced to find extra accommodation for them which he did by adding a second storey to the house.

Winbourne seems to have been an extremely happy home. In 1856 George wrote that among his many blessings the greatest and most satisfactory was that of an affectionate, industrious and dearly loved family.

At the time of writing George and Eliza were living at Winbourne with their large family, his brother Edward was at Fernhill, and Henry, another brother, was at Glenmore. On Sundays the three families met at St Thomas' Church where no doubt a lot of family gossip was exchanged.

Twice a year George drove to Mudgee to lend a hand and keep himself in the picture. It was all familiar ground to him. He had been among the first of the settlers to penetrate and explore the rich country at and beyond the Burrundulla flats and further down the Cudgegong, and his diary of the journey he made to the region from Bathurst in 1821 when he was a young man of twenty-six is extant.

In 1822 George and his brother Henry brought cattle from Bathurst and took up land at Mudgee on a ticket of occupation. George called his land Burrundulla, and in 1830 sheep were brought from Mulgoa to Mudgee. The first grant from the Crown for this land is dated 1834.

Other settlers followed and in 1838 a notice appeared in the Government Gazette that a site had been fixed upon for a village (Mudgee) and allotments were to be sold. The site was some miles west of Burrundulla. A census taken in 1841 shows that there were seven brick houses and twenty-nine of wood or slab. By this time Burrundulla was a thriving establishment.

The eighteenth century spelling that George tended to use has been modernised; the only exception being his spelling of "Winbourn". I do not know when or why the final "e" was introduced.

The first of these letters was written on George's return home from one of his half yearly visits to Burrundulla.

This is a list of George and Eliza's children and their ages in 1846:

Georgina (Donna), twenty-two.

George Henry, twenty-one.

Archy, nineteen.

Rebecca (Beck), eighteen.

Charley, fourteen.

Sophy, thirteen.

Fred, nine.

Alex, eight.

Albert, five.

Una, four.

Una's Godparents were her two eldest sisters, Georgina and Rebecca and her eldest brother George Henry. Most of the Godparents of the other children were either Bell or Cox relations.

Winbourn
28th August 1847

My dear George Henry,

This night week poor Knight was suddenly taken from us, and still to me it seems almost like a dream. Everything I see and do reminds me of him and the awful suddenness of his call is indeed most appalling to me. I am obliged to keep myself constantly employed to drive as much as possible the thoughts from my mind.

On Wednesday I received from Melbourne the two enclosed letters, and have answered them by saying we have disposed of nearly all our rams for this season, but that there are still about forty left, which I would sell taking them all at 30/- each, but as they seem very desirous to have the very best rams that are to be procured, I have said they may have forty of my own selected rams at five pounds each and that they shall be here to await their answer, ready for the Shamrock's trip in October, and if they declined taking them they could go back again to Mudgee. Therefore will you keep in mind that forty of our own chosen rams answering the description as nearly as you can by their letters are sent down in the flock that are to remain here.

I have thought over what you said about wishing to start Moore's flock on the second of September, and do not think it is possible I can be back from the Hunter in time for them, but if they have started Archy must only do the best he can with them, as it will not do to delay when they once arrive. I will not delay, but it is possible the trial may not come on the day named.

Archy will begin the work on the dam about the middle of the next week. There is a good deal to do on it as one of the platforms is washed away and the other misplaced. We must now slot the entire corner to make it secure. Poor Knight's sudden call will give Archy a good deal more to look after as I have now given up the farm to him, reserving to myself the right to point out what I wish to have done, and he is making a very good beginning. If you are not able to come down we shall all be kept pretty hard at it, but do not mind if you see it best to remain up there. I shall not be able to write to you next week, or indeed the week after either, so this must be my last till I return from the Hunter.

Sunday: We have put in the black flat at Harry Knight's with potatoes, but unless we get rain I fear there is little chance of our reaping benefit from our labours. We are indeed in a very precarious state at present. Our beautiful wheat crop daily dwindling away, and the hay crop only just appearing to be parched up again. We have our corn ground all ploughed and nearly harrowed down, but to try to break the clods would be labour in vain

till the rain comes. The little bit of river ground is the only piece that will fall to pieces and that has worked better than I ever saw new ground before, being rather dry the grass roots have fallen to pieces well. The lucerne is trying to grow and would soon be beautiful if rain fell. By dint of very hard work I shall pretty well accomplish all I wished in the old garden amongst the grape vines; had I not to go to the Hunter I should do very well, but perhaps it is better for me as it will give me a rest for a little as I just now am weak, low and miserable.

You have not said whether I am to hire any men to send up. I shall get Reeve's loading when I go to Sydney which will be on Tuesday, and it will be up here on Saturday ready for his arrival, and Peter will have the cistern made. I thought it best for him to put it together and I will direct it to be put on top of the loading with four good strong standards to keep it from the wheels. The press I hope will be able to go by Johnston's. I am very glad your new fence is at last commenced and trust you will be able at any rate to turn the road as far as the Brick Kiln, which will send the dust of the travellers away from our shearing shed. I did not think the dragging of the trees would have been such a heavy job.

Mr Bigg has got to Sydney. He did not call here, but wrote me and enclosed his rent for three months for £100 but he dated it 1st September one month after the time he promised. He has only paid for his own rams, £39 and £10. Mr Balfour has not yet made his appearance. Has he returned to Mudgee? I am much disappointed as he has not sent the money and I have promised several parties that I will pay them when in Sydney this week. It is still possible I may meet him in Penrith on my way to Sydney on Tuesday, as I shall go that way for your letter and then on. Otherwise the things will not be up in time for Reeves. I will not close till tomorrow.

Monday: I must now, my dear boy, close this as Kellett takes it on his way to Sydney for mail. Tomorrow I go myself. I send into Penrith tonight to get your letter and learn whether Mr Balfour has arrived, and then I shall go direct from here to Parramatta for the two o'clock steamer. A change I trust will benefit me, for I am now truly wretched, and having so many little things to complete in the garden quite wears me out in my present weak state. The serious state of the weather is also against me, as when the mind is depressed everything is seen on the dark side. Peter had begun the cistern today and finds his boards will not admit of it being more than six foot six inches long. I have therefore told him if his boards will run out to make it wider as I should think it better it should hold more than less water.

God bless you my dear son.

Your affectionate father,

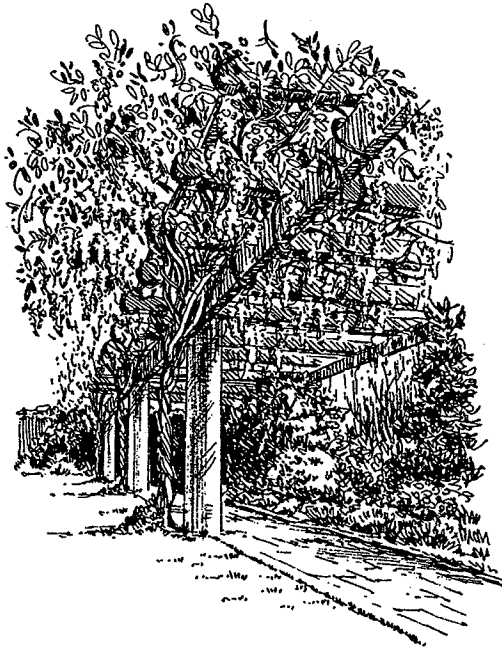
Geo. Cox

James Knight accidentally shot himself when getting through a fence at Mulgoa. George's concern for his servants is very endearing. In his will he requests that any old servants who are at Winbourne at the time of his death, be allowed to remain there for as long as they wish, "and are to be treated with kindness for my sake".

The Hunter River Steamship Co. was thriving in the 1840s. It had three ships plying between Sydney and Morpeth called the "Rose", the "Shamrock" and the "Thistle". From this letter it sounds as if the "Shamrock" is going to take the rams to Melbourne. It was only six months ago that the rain was causing such havoc; and now this dreadful drought.

We never hear anything about the trial that took George to the Hunter. In fact we never hear anything about the trip at all. Let's hope that he benefited from the change, and found his dear Donna well and happy.

The first Cox shearing shed at Mudgee was not far from the homestead, the flour mill and the Brick Kiln creek where the sheep were washed before shearing.



WISTERIA, FERNHILL.