Book Review: My Dear Miss Macarthur

The Leslie Brothers’ Settlement of the Darling Downs is one of the cornerstones of Queensland history. Yet, apart from the fact that they were named Patrick, George and Walter and the runs they occupied were known as “Toolburra”, “Canning Downs” and “Goomburra” (remnants of which still exist), the average Australian knows little of their origins, their Australian connections and what happened to them eventually.

In My Dear Miss Macarthur, Jane de Falbe, in a charming and thoroughly researched work, has taken the memoirs of her husband’s grandmother, Emmeline de Falbe, widow of George Leslie, and née Macarthur, as the foundation on which she has built an explanation of all the things not commonly known about the Leslies.

In doing so we gain a further insight into the domestic affairs not only of the Leslies of Warthill and their Davidson relatives but also of the Macarthurs and the Kings to whom the Leslies became so closely related by marriage. Mrs. de Falbe does not hesitate to produce warts and all portraits of her characters — her geese are by no means all swans.

For instance while she concedes Patrick Leslie his title (conferred by H.S. Russell) of “Prince of Bushmen” she does not hesitate to detail his impetuosity and lack of managerial capacity. It was this failing that made him prey to the pitless mercantilism of Walter S. Davidson and loaded him with debt for so many years of his life.

Walter Davidson’s acquisitive greed for wealth is not concealed but despite the vast fortune he accumulated he had the disappointment of knowing the bulk of it could go to his two ne’er-do-well sons, although one did predecease him by barely a year.

Members of the Macarthur family of Camden such as Edward who lived lavishly in England at family expense, although later receiving a knighthood and becoming general officer commanding British forces in Australia for a brief period, are critically reviewed.

On the other side of the coin there is an interesting portrayal of Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur, nephew of the “quarrelsome” John, husband of Governor Philip Gidley King’s daughter Anna Maria and father of eleven children (six daughters and five sons). A kindly father and husband, his prosperity ended with the cessation of transportation and the poor economic conditions of the 1840s. Bankrupted in 1848 he accepted a government post as police magistrate at Ipswich in the Moreton Bay District where in 1852 his wife died.

Of his six daughters Kate married Patrick Leslie, Anna married Capt. J.C. Wickham and Emmeline married George Leslie.
Walter Leslie's health broke down and he had to leave Australia. George was left to develop "Canning Downs" on his own. He did so but at the cost of his own life.

His health broken, he sold out to, ironically, Walter Davidson's son Gilbert, and returned to Great Britain. He died in London in 1860 aged 39 years.

Emmeline survived him until 1911. In 1866 she married a Danish naval officer named de Falbe by whom she had two sons. Her second husband died in 1871 as the result of the rigours of Polar exploration he had experienced earlier in life.

It was Emmeline's Recollections and personal papers which inspired Jane de Falbe to embark on the work now reviewed.

The book has been published by Kangaroo Press of P.O. Box 75, Kenthurst, New South Wales, 2156. Copiously illustrated in black and white and with eight colour plates reproducing contemporary sketches by Conrad Martens, this work is recommended to students of Australian and Queensland history. Price $29.95 plus $2.50 packing and postage.

J.C.H. Gill

Masonic gathering around the turn of the century, probably the dedication of the Hall in the background. Sir Augustus Charles Gregory is seated in the centre next to the Vicar.
Book Review: Dear Mr M

Posted by Karoly Molina on Apr 28, 2017 in Literature. I had previously recommended the novel Het Diner by Herman Koch and on this post, I would like to recommend Geachte Heer M by the same author. Personal Photograph.