

# Clarence River District

AN HISTORICAL REVIEW.

OVER 50 YEARS OF STERLING WORK.

(By R.J.S.)

When the young Australian comes to recognise and appreciate the yeoman work done by all classes of pioneers—those men and women who took their lives in their hands and forced from rude Nature a fitting home for themselves and their children, and who made possible the Australia of the present—then will we see the birth of that true national spirit, a spirit rising grand in its splendour and magnificence. Yesterday, this land was a wilderness of undeveloped resources; to-day, a thin white line stretches round a continent. The peaceful army of pioneers slaved and toiled, year in and year out, in the face of droughts, fires and floods. The weak went under, but the strong won through, giving to the country of their adoption a race of sterling men and women who are overlastingly proud that they can be termed "Australians." Every State has its heroes of the pioneering days, and the tales of hardships and trials ring in the same note. The history of the Clarence River district of New South Wales teems with brilliant deeds done by the early men and women, and one's heart warms when he hears an old pioneer recount the settlement work of other days. To the good people of the Lower Clarence, chiefly the residents of Maclean, more than ordinary credit is due, for on January 26 of this year there was gathered in that town the majority of the pioneers of the Clarence district at a celebration unique of its kind. May other districts throughout all the States hold similar gatherings. Before dealing with the early history of the Clarence, which is closely connected with that of the Moreton Bay settlement, it would not be out of place to briefly refer to the district as it is to-day. The river is a magnificent stream some 190 miles long, with the following chief tributaries: Orara, 80 miles; Nymboida, 110 miles; Timbara, 95 miles, on the right, and the Mann, 90 miles, on the left. Rightly, the Clarence should be called "The River of Islands," for no fewer than 98 are completely surrounded by its waters. Some are very small, while others are of vast extent, and are closely settled by farmers. Grafton, with its wide streets, in which are planted all manners of shade trees, is the capital city, with a population of some 6123. Luxurious coastal steamers ply regularly between the town and Sydney. Leaving Grafton in a river boat, the trip to the sea is one that should delight any tourist. On each side of the river the farms come down to the water's edge. Here and there can be seen the old farm-houses of the early settlers, while in contrast stand further back the up-to-date homes of the present tillers of the soil. A journey of 10 miles and Uluarra appears in view. A cosy town, it is noted for the big rowing regatta it holds every year in a reach of the river, which has a championship course. Further on Brashgrove and Cowper are passed, while 22 miles from Grafton stands Lawrence, a town which lost its one grand opportunity to be the capital of the Clarence. In the early days teams started out regularly for Tenterfield, and all the trade of that vast district filtered through Lawrence. Eight miles more Maclean appears in view, a town which impresses one most favourably on first appearances. It is built on

high land, rising from the river, which assumes noble proportions, and is more than picturesque. During the last 15 years Maclean has made wonderful strides, but it is a town of disappointments. The originally-surveyed Government town, with its wide streets, situated on high ground, is noted only for the Government offices. The other Maclean, which is thickly populated, was privately surveyed with narrow thoroughfares. At night a faint ray of light is shed by street kerosene lights, while walking along some of the alleged asphalt footpaths is like "the rocky road to Dublin." Naturally, Maclean is the prettiest town on the river, but mighty little has been done by human hands. Every knoll around the place reveals a scene worthy of an artist's brush. For hours upon hours one could stand and gaze upon the windings of the noble river, with its shores dotted with rich farms. Eighteen miles from the town by water is Yamba, a noted seaside resort, situated at the entrance of the river. On the other headland is Iluka, also a watering-place. In the season thousands visit both places. Indeed, from the mouth of the Clarence to Copmanhurst, past Grafton, there is close settlement. The wealth of the residents is great, and there are few failures. The actual discovery of the river is somewhat veiled in mystery, and is the source of much discussion. In 1799, when on his voyage, Matthew Flinders discovered Clarence River, but he was unaware that Shoal Bay, which is the mouth of such a magnificent stream, entered the bay. It is stated that Captain Rous, who was in command of the "Rainbow," was the first white man to find the river, which he named the Clarence, probably in honour of his patron, the Duke of Clarence. It is stated that in 1830, one year after the discovery, his health was toasted at a race meeting at Parramatta, in honour of his find. Curiously enough, the old New South Wales records show nothing as to Rous's alleged discovery. Some years afterwards one, Richard Craig, brought to Sydney the story of a great river, and in 1836, a cutter known as the Prince George, was sent to verify the statement. Having returned to Sydney with proofs of the river, Craig was awarded the sum of £100, although, owing to the heavy sea on the bar, the boat never crossed in. Craig also communicated his information to private individuals. Two of these, Francis Girard and Thomas Small, sent the "Taree" and the "Susan" respectively to the river. The former never entered the heads, but the Susan had more luck, and the party was taken up the river and landed at what was called Rocky Mouth, now known as Maclean. Later, the pioneers moved to Woolford Island. Thus the Susan was the first white boat to appear on the river. Later, Mr. Small brought cattle to the district. The first run was taken up by Mr. Girard, in 1839, at Waterview, and he was the pioneer squatter. In the same year bad times were felt in Sydney, and the more adventurous decided to strike out for the "Big River" and endeavour to earn a livelihood in timber-getting. The talk of large quantities of cedar stirred their minds. They were a hardy race, rough and uncouth in many ways, and revelled in the free life of the scrubs. But above all, they were men and not weaklings. Gradually the tales of the Big River moved the Government to send a boat, The King William, under Captain Perry, Deputy Surveyor-General, to explore the stream. The small timber and supply boats acted as pilots. The river was explored as far as Copmanhurst. Returning to Sydney, great enthusiasm was shown at the bright

as far as Copmanshurst. Returning to Sydney, great enthusiasm was shown at the bright possibilities of the district as a pastoral and timber-getting region. A number of squatters trekked to the district, while other timber-getters came to join the few who were already earning a decent living. Thus the early history is wrapped round the lives of these two classes. How many districts in Australia owe their birth to the squatter and the timber-getter? There is always the first craze, and as the settlement advances they are pushed farther back. Dr. Dobie, who owned Cassillis, purchased Ramornie station from the Government in 1839. The following year he drove his sheep on the long journey to his newly-acquired estate on the Clarence. In 1845 he sold out to the Mannings. One of the family, Arthur, eventually became Under-Secretary for Queensland. French proprietors followed, who were succeeded by C. G. Tindall, who, it is stated, established one of the first meat preserving plants in the Commonwealth. In 1840, the two Walkers selected Newbold Grange. For years they had a hard fight to retain their land owing to bad times and the precarious position of the pastoral industry. Indeed, they had to dispense with all assistance. They did their own cooking and washing, but like many others of the early

days, they held on. When boiling down came into the custom things took a turn for the better, and they were repaid for all their hardships. Gordon Brook, known all over Australia, was taken up by Captain Crozier, R.N., in 1840, but sold to Dr. Dobie, who Bondock and Barnes became the proprietors. Eventually, T. H. Smith joined the two, and in the end the whole property came into his hands. In the early forties wheat was grown on the run, but rust ruined the crop after a few years. The great poet, Kendall, was in charge of the sheep, and, no doubt, he gained many inspirations for the poems he later wrote. Yulgilbar, the training ground of jackarous, was owned by the Ogilvies. The Mylne Brothers purchased Eatonville in '39. Two brothers, John and Thomas, lost their lives in the ill-fated Dunbar, which was wrecked near Sydney Heads in 1857. They were just returning from a visit to the old land, accompanied by their two sisters. Another brother, James Mylne, took a trip home, but only reached Malta, when he died. Captain Graham Mylne came to live at the old homestead, but he left for Queensland, returning in later years to Eatonville, where he was buried. The Mylnes were known for the quality of their horseflesh. Goldfinder did duty at the stud, while Kelpie was another noted animal. Splendor, a mare, whose name was something to conjure with, was also owned by the Mylnes. The Clarence has always been renowned for the quality of its horses, and Gordon Brook played an important part in the early breed. All over the Clarence the squatters held sway. Theirs was a hard life, but they laid the foundation of the district, and their names should not be forgotten. Mr. W. Robertson had a run near Lawrence, and Mr. J. Sharp occupied the land between Alumny Creek and the Clarence, which he called Woolport. In 1840, Grafton was surveyed, and named after the Duke of Grafton. In the early years it was always termed "The Settlement." Progress was slow, and it had in Lawrence, a township further down the river, a strong rival. All the trade from the country round Tenterfield and along the Richmond River came via Lawrence, while South Grafton was the port for Glen Innes, Armidale,

River came via Lawrence, while South Grafton was the port for Glen Innes, Armidale, and Inverell. The Grafton residents, in 1860, sent out an expedition to find a suitable site for a road terminating in their town. They were successful, and money was collected and spent for the purpose of diverting the trade from Lawrence. Feeling ran high between the two places, but the latter township never recovered from the blow it received. In 1857, the first farm on the Clarence was sold at Lawrence, and in the same year the Crown threw open for sale a number of farms at Ulmarra, Southgate, Great Marlow, and Carr's Creek. These were the farms purchased by the Hunter River settlers, but let Mr. Page's own words tell the tale: "Amongst the pioneer settlers of Ulmarra, which was then known as the Sandspit, were A. Amos, T. Clark, W. Lee, J. Pateman, D. M'Farlane, J. M'Lauchlan, A. M'Leod, E. G. Chowne, and T. Small, who purchased river-bank farms. At Southgate, and along the river bank up to Grafton, the pioneers were: W. Leonard, H. Gerrard, Angus Cameron, H. M'Donald, W. Hindmarsh, W. Boorman, S. Short; at Alumny Creek, W. Golliford, T. C. Woods, W. Tapper, J. Eggins, and H. Eggins; at Carr's Creek, King M'Aulay, J. M'Farlane, H. Dix, T. Hadfield, J. Crispin, D. Anderson, and others. The Waterview Estate, near South Grafton, was subdivided and let to tenants." The Land Acts of 1861, fathered by Sir John Robertson, then plain John, allowed of selection before survey. Anyone could select, provided the area was not less than 40 and not more than 320 acres. The price was fixed at £1 per acre, of which the selector had to pay 5s down, and the rest by

very easy instalments. And, by the way, these said Land Acts caused a great constitutional crisis in New South Wales. The Legislative Council, which was composed of nominees, who held their seats for five years, insisted on certain alterations, which were not acceptable to the Government of the day. The Governor, Sir John Young, was persuaded to pack the House with 21 new Councillors, but the Government's attempt was frustrated by the President of the Council resigning his position, while a number of others left the meeting which had been called to swear in the new appointees. Therefore, the meeting elapsed, and before another could be convened the five years was up. An attempt had been made to have the House elective, but the Bill was shelved. The Constitution Act, which still held good, ordered that the new Councillors should hold their position for life. The first Courthouse was built in what is now Grafton, while in 1841 the first inn was opened. The next important epoch in the history of the district was the discovery of gold in 1856. From that year till about 1862, there was a considerable stream of diggers making their way to the fields at Tooloom, Fairfield, Pretty Gully, and Boonoo Boonoo. A large quantity of gold was found. A police escort which was stationed at Grafton, made a trip a fortnight, the gold being brought in on pack horses. A number of the returning miners settled in the district. While the squatters, timber-getters, and gold-diggers all played their part in the early development work, yet it remained for close settlement by farmers to make possible the district as it is seen to-day. The heavy floods in the Hunter River Valley drove a number of the agriculturists out, and they had to look for more suitable land. Some came to the Clarence, and as usual were the resorts that there was

suitable land. Some came to the Clarence, and so good were the reports that there was quite an influx of settlers from the Hunter, Paterson, and Hawkesbury Rivers. Mr. Thomas Page, who came to the Clarence in 1885, in the Grafton, with his father, James Page, the first head teacher of the first national school at Grafton, is one of those who has kept records of the early days. He relates how the journey from Sydney to the Clarence Heads occupied two days. On the third morning they crossed in, with the assistance of Pilot Freeburn. To all the voyagers the river was a revelation of nature in her grandeur and beauty. There was not a sign of a clearing or settlement from the heads until they reached Lawrence. The scrub came down to the water's edge. Creepers, with all manner of flowers, orchids, the giant trees, the birds and animal life, formed a picture which not even 50 odd years would wipe from the memory. Little did one think that hardy and plucky farmers would clear the land and compel it to give up its toll. Great care had to be exercised in choosing suitable men for the Legislative Council. The Governor and Mr. Cowper, the Premier, consulted Wentworth, who had just returned from England. The latter was made President, and his 22 colleagues were selected for their public spirit and ability. The Land Bills were then passed with few alterations. To this day the name of John Robertson is honoured by all the old settlers. A great impetus was given settlement on the Clarence, and farmers came from all quarters to try their luck on the rich scrub lands. Around Maclean chiefly Scotchmen settled, and every Sunday they met in their church, when their own minister preached in Gaelic. They were men and women of fine physique. The wealth and importance of the Clarence district is the best monument to the work of these settlers, for to them is the chiefest credit. But not only Scotch were the pioneers, but Irish, English, and even Germans. The latter settled at the back of the racecourse in Grafton, and chiefly grew tobacco and cultivated vines. Captain Wiseman, who traded to the Clarence, encouraged settlement by promising to convey to Sydney all maize for one shilling per bag for a term of two years. The promise was faithfully fulfilled. Wheat was also grown, but the climate did not suit it. Mr. Alfred Lardner, who had a farm in Grafton, was the first to plant an orangery, while he obtained some banana plants from Colombo. In 1868 the first sugar mill, a co-operative concern, was opened at Uluwarra by the Governor, the Earl of Belmore. It proved a failure. In 1875 Mr. W. Small and Mr. Greer purchased the mill, and they imported a manager from the West Indies. New machinery was installed. Later, Mr. Gray was appointed manager, and success crowned their efforts till want of cane compelled a cessation. Other co-operative mills were started, but numbers were failures. Mr. Kinnear, of Chataworth Island, was another of the pioneer sugar men. In the year 1859 Grafton was proclaimed a municipality. Mr. J. E. Chapman was elected first Mayor. The first ministers who held services at Grafton were Rev. A. E. Selwyn (Church of England), Father Timothy McCarthy (Roman Catholic), whose district included all the Clarence and New England north of Armidale; Rev. James Collins (Presbyterian), Rev. W. Fidler (Methodist), and Rev. R. P. Becher (Baptist). Previous to 1859 a strenuous battle had been fought for the autonomy of Queensland. The residents of the district from the Clarence to the Tweed were in favour of being included in the new colony, and though Dr. Lang

advocated their claims, other influences were too strong, and they were omitted. Originally the Clarence was included in the Darling Downs electorate, and Mr. Arthur Hodgson was the accredited representative. When the Clarence was formed into a separate district the first election was held in 1859, when Mr. Clark Irving, of Sydney, defeated Mr. A. M'Kellar, of the Richmond River, and Mr. E. M. Ryan, of the Clarence River. With the exception of a few Government officials who subscribed to the "Sydney Morning Herald," the chief paper circulating in the Clarence was the "Moreton Bay Courier," which was looked upon as the settler's friend. The old hands remember the publication, and speak of the good work it did. It is claimed that Mrs. Howard, nee Henrietta Small, who was born in 1842, was the oldest female white child on the Clarence. Mr. John Olive, now of the Richmond River, claims that he was the first white child born in the parish of Southgate—on December 10, 1856. The first telegraph line was constructed from Grafton to Tenterfield in 1861, and the residents were privileged to send 10 words anywhere within the State for 4s. The pioneer newspaper, which was published in 1859, was called the "Clarence and Richmond Examiner," and was owned by Mr. W. E. Vincent. Dr. Little was the first medical practitioner, and Mr. James Lees Willoughby the first solicitor.