

FROM THE DOWNS TO THE DON AND THE DEE The Story of the Brothers, Leith-Hay

(Read by Mr. J. W. Collinson, F.R.G.S., Aust., at the meeting of the Historical Society of Queensland on August 28th, 1947)

(Illustrated by lantern slides depicting Leith Hall, First Hut at Rannes, Mr. and Mrs. James Leith-Hay, maps, scenic views of the Darling Downs, and portraits of people to whom reference was made)

The story of the brothers, James, Norman, and Charles Leith-Hay, for the purpose of this paper, has its beginning at the first settlement on the Darling Downs in 1840. Actually considerable romance attaches to what transpired in previous years, both in this State, and in far-away Scotland. First in order of importance was the discovery of the Darling Downs in 1827, and the location of a possible gap in the range to the eastward. In the following year Allan Cunningham was able to confirm his previous discovery of the opening in the range, when in July 1828, he commenced a trip with Captain Logan and Fraser, the Colonial Botanist, both of whom left him and returned to Brisbane after an unsuccessful attempt to reach the Richmond River. Cunningham made his way to Limestone, and from there reached the Gap, and was able to obtain a view of the magnificent country he had discovered the previous year.

It must be remembered that Moreton Bay convict settlement was a closed area, and remained so for many years. There came a time when proclamation was made of a fifty mile limit, but that only came to pass when there appeared to be a danger of encroachment, and was not withdrawn till 1842. Permits had been issued to visitors and some free settlers before free settlement was proclaimed.

From the time when Allan Cunningham visited the settlement in 1828, the convict system held full sway till 1839, and continued in a modified form under Gravatt and Gorman till 1842. In 1842 Brisbane Town was proclaimed a free settlement.

But the work of Allan Cunningham did not bear fruit till after a period of some thirteen years.

When Ernest Elphinstone Dalrymple arrived at his home in Aberdeen, on furlough from his regiment in India, he spoke of his travels in India, Ceylon and

North America, and particularly of his meeting with Allan Cunningham, who had described to him the new country in Australia and its wonderful possibilities. At a dinner given at his ancestral home, he so fired the imagination of those present, that he had no difficulty in forming a party of ten, including himself, to seek fame and fortune in the new land. Of these only seven names are recorded, namely, Patrick and George Leslie, George and John Gammie, George McAdam, and James Fletcher. No mention is made of the Leith-Hays, three of the five sons of Colonel Sir Alexander Leith-Hay of Rannes and Leith Hall. But the family records establish the possibility that James, Norman, and Charles Leith-Hay completed the number. Later other names appear such as Walter Leslie and George Elphinstone Dalrymple whose appearance on the Downs closely followed the previous Aberdonians, but not in time to acquire holdings in their own names.

The order of settlement on the Downs was apparently on the principle of first come first served, and thus we find Patrick Leslie on Canning Downs. The diary of Patrick Leslie (note—"Genesis" p. 164-71) gives some information of the progress of selection, King and Sibley at Clifton, Hodgson at Etonvale, Isaac at Gowrie, with "Tinker" Campbell and others following and taking up land further on. The first supplies from Moreton penal settlement were Leslies and Hodgson's in October 1840 under permits signed by Sir George Gipps. The Leslie's holding, Canning Downs, extended from the heads of the Condamine to the watershed of Dalrymple Creek and Glengallon Creek, and on both banks of the Condamine to the southern and western boundaries of Talgai and Rosenthal. The epic of roadmaking to the coast belongs to the years 1840 to 1842 when those pioneers mustered men and teams at the Springs and opened a road down the range by voluntary effort, the empty teams going on to Brisbane for supplies.

Patrick Leslie soon relinquished Toolburra, Talgai, and Goomburra to others of the Aberdonian group; retaining his own and his brothers' interest in Canning Downs as the Aberdeen Pastoral Co. (later North British Australian Co.). Consequently we find E. E. Dalrymple at Goomburra on Dalrymple Creek; George and John Gammie at Talgai; and the three brothers Charles, James and Norman Leith-Hay at Toolburra. It is recorded that James Leith-Hay had previously

been overseer at Canning Downs, but it is not clear when the brothers arrived on the Downs, but like Walter Leslie and E. E. Dalrymple they must have arrived with Leslie or soon after.

Previous to his death in 1844, E. E. Dalrymple sold Goomburra to the Aberdeen Pastoral Co., including his uncle's gift of thoroughbred horses and Angus cattle. About 1852 the Leith-Hay Bros. sold Toolburra to Patrick Leslie, and commenced a migration in search of a larger holding.

The adventures of men opening new country; finding an outlet to the coast; of the risks they ran from the depredations of the blacks and dingoes; of flood, fire, and drought, are not part of this narrative, though they were serious enough to the pioneers. Sheep had to be shepherded by day, and penned at night in stake and wattle sheepfolds. The days of boundary riding and wire netting came later, when bark huts and tarpaulins and tents were replaced with more substantial homes.

Leaving the Downs with 28,000 sheep, with the usual equipage of bullock carts and camp outfit necessary for a long journey with stock, we next hear of the acquisition by the Leith-Hays of Mer Mer (Running Creek) and Marodum (Karrie) in the Wide Bay district; very little inspection would have been necessary to show that the country was unsuitable for sheep.

The pilgrimage was continued, and in March 1853 they travelled inland, and passing through Archer Bros. holding at Coonanbulla near Eidsvold on the Burnett, they crossed the divide into the Dawson Valley, and eventually settled and named Rannes, a distance of 130 miles from Eidsvold, the nearest settlement at that time.

The settlement on the Dawson Valley dates back, then, to the arrival of the Leith-Hay Bros. with their staff and flock of sheep in April 1853, settling just below the junction of the two rivers the Don and Dee, on the west slope of the range, naming their place Rannes and the streams after their home in Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

Rannes to-day is the railway junction of the lines to Callide in the Don basin, and Theodore in the Dawson Valley, but its intimate history is full of romance and adventure, with a vague and forever incomplete record of a tragedy of the sea.

James and Norman Leith-Hay (Charles had returned to England in 1854) undertook the pioneering work of establishing the station on the high knoll overlooking an expanse of beautiful country. That this country proved below expectations is only one of the many examples of the risks taken in early settlement. Bark hut; sheep pens; fencing for stock; soon transformed the virgin country into the farthest north settlement of 1853.

David and William Archer passed through Rannes on the 30th April 1853, (Historical Society, Vol. 1, p. 335) on their trip, when they discovered and named the Fitzroy River, where later they settled in 1855 at Gracemere with the sheep brought over from Eidsvold through Westwood.

When shearing was in progress in 1854, Lieut. H. Walker was a visitor at the station, and his native troopers were camped on the opposite side of the creek. One night the blacks attacked the camp, which was only 200 yards from the house in which James and Norman were sleeping, one trooper was killed and several others injured.

The first shearing from Rannes took place in 1854. The wool went to Maryborough, via Gayndah, a distance of 220 miles. Later, in 1856, a shipment of wool was made from Port Curtis (now Gladstone) a distance of 110 miles. The track was up the Don River and crossed the Calliope Range, and followed the Calliope River to Stowe (which was settled in 1855 and was then the nearest settlement to Rannes) over a difficult and dangerous road. A second load of wool was made from Gladstone in 1856, and on the return journey, Mrs. James Leith-Hay travelled back to Rannes in the bullock dray with a baby daughter (not twelve months old), accompanied by her husband and a young woman servant, over this dangerous road with little escort, at a time when the blacks were troublesome. Mrs. Leith-Hay (who was a daughter of Colonel Edward George Gray, P.M., at Ipswich) lived at Rannes for some years and attained the distinction for some time as the most northerly white woman in Australia.

In 1885 the Lower Dawson was the outpost of settlements (Historical Society, Q., Vol. I., p. 328). The Crown Land Commissioner, William Henry Wiseman, lived in a stockaded tent at the Rannes head station. A C.P.S. Court was opened. Mr. P. Sellheim

was also at Rannes. It was from this headquarters, that Wiseman executed his mandate in 1856 to open a port on the Fitzroy, and the owners of Camboon and Rannes came to his aid in making his investigations in search of a site, ultimately decided upon on the banks of the Fitzroy, now Rockhampton. A twelve mile road had to be cut through the Dee scrub. Three dray loads of wool from Rannes formed part of the cargo of the "Enterprise" schooner, the first vessel to leave Rockhampton.

But a load of wool had left Rannes at the end of 1856 for Port Curtis, and was shipped in the schooner "Seabelle" which left Port Curtis on the 7th March 1857 (Historical Society, Vol. I., p. 328 f.n.). Among the passengers were Mr. Norman Leith-Hay, Sergeant Harty, his wife and two daughters. The vessel encountered heavy weather and was blown off her course. It was more than twelve months, before it was ascertained that she was wrecked on Keppel Island, and vague rumours indicated that the crew and passengers, after getting ashore were murdered by the blacks, though it was also said that the white woman and the girls were spared. But the mystery to all extents and purposes was never solved.

Rannes, as the outpost of settlement, became a rendezvous for other settlers further out, and in this way Dan Conners, brought 20,000 sheep, which were allowed to run on Rannes station, till he, with Elliott Bros., started out to their own holdings north of the Fitzroy. Conners took up Princhester, about thirty miles from Canoona, and Elliott Bros. settled at Canoona.

The Leith-Hays were also the owners of Banana, which was probably part of the original run. In 1859 they sold Rannes and Banana to Towns and Stewart, in 1864 it passed to Thomas Andrew and John Brown Watt. In 1866 the property was transferred to J. W. Watt, who took into partnership Michael Wickham Cunningham in 1884. It was sold to Andrew Arthur Stirrat in 1904, who held the property till 1913, when he sold to the present owner J. L. Wilson, of Calliope.

James Leith-Hay, after the sale of Rannes, became Gold Commissioner at Rockhampton, and was afterwards appointed to the position of Police Magistrate at Bowen. His wife died at Ipswich on June 7th, 1875, and the following year James Leith-Hay died at St. Servian, while on a visit to France.

The memorial cairn at Rannes, erected on the side of the main Wowan Highway was placed there by Mr. G. L. Wilson, the present owner, and is near the Rannes railway station.

The story of the Leith-Hays would not be complete without some reference to their family history. James Leith-Hay was a son of General Sir Andrew Leith-Hay of Leith Hall and Rannes, Aberdeen, Scotland, and a brother of Colonel Alexander Sebastian Leith-Hay of the 93rd Highlanders. A daughter married Lord Henry Phipps, a son of the Marquis of Normanby, Governor of Queensland. (Historical Society, Q., Vol. I, p. 31, f.n.)

General Sir Andrew Leith-Hay is described in the "Dictionary of National Biography" as a writer on architecture. He went through the Peninsular war, was distinguished at the capture of Badajoz, leading his section by escalade, after a strong feint in direct attack, to turn the whole of the general attack to victory. He published two volumes on the history of the Peninsular War.

Colonel Alexander Sebastian Leith-Hay, elder brother of James, served with distinction in the 93rd Highlanders through the Canadian Rebellion of 1857-1859, the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny.

Charles, James, and Norman, the subject of this paper, were younger brothers of Col. A. S. Leith-Hay.

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See also "Opals and Agates," Nehemiah Bartley, p. 142, 142-3, 145.