

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY ON TUESDAY 10 MAY AT 8PM.

Present: The President, Caroline Homer, in the chair and about 50 members and friends.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous meeting were read, and approved as a correct record.

Business: The President referred to the various matters noticed in the recent newsletter.

Speaker: The President introduced Leonie Mickleborough as having pursued the study of Tasmanian history, most notably through post-graduate studies of Lieutenant-Governors William Sorell and Sir John Eardley Eardley-Wilmot. The latter was the subject of her address tonight.

Ms Mickleborough began by thanking those who had come to the meeting, when they could have been home listening to the Budget. Her subject came from distinguished English lineage, albeit when he was a child his mother was found guilty of adultery with a household servant, divorce following. The future Sir John attended Harrow and Cambridge then qualifying as a lawyer. He lived in the family's splendid Warwickshire residence. His first wife died, leaving eight children aged under nine; he soon remarried, with yet more progeny resulting. Active in his county's governance, Wilmot was created Baronet, and in 1832 elected to the House of Commons, there remaining until his appointment to Van Diemen's Land. His membership of the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries, and the Linnean Society witnessed the webs of patronage to which he belonged. Such was the background to his appointment hither, made despite the current Secretary of State for the Colonies having recently spoken of him as a 'muddle-brained blockhead'. The salary of £3500 might have been a vital inducement. His particular intended task was to implement the probation system of convict management.

The new incumbent arrived in Hobart in August 1843, attended by one son; two others soon followed, but never his wife. He resided in 'old' Government House, financial stringency long delaying plans for a new building on the Domain. One of his early ventures was to encourage better farming by small proprietors. He likewise was much interested in developing the Government gardens on the Domain, the wall named for him duly complementing that built in George Arthur's day. Linked with the gardens was Wilmot's establishment of a 'Botanical and Horticultural Society', in 1846 granted Queen Victoria's patronage and so becoming the first 'Royal Society' outside the United Kingdom. The gardens specialised in fruit-growing, but had more general displays. Admission became liberal, and horticultural shows were sponsored. Cuttings were sold to local nurserymen; particular interest was given to plants of possible medical value, and specimens of local timber were sent to Britain in hope that they might prove suitable for ship-building. There was some criticism of the expenditure on the gardens.

Wilmot patronised the Regatta, re-establishing Pavilion Point as its site, after a removal down-river. The diary of GT Boyes reports the private hospitality he offered. That diary also reveals gossip about Wilmot's flirtations with young women, specifically Julia Sorell. These stories played an important part in his recall, April 1846, although the public reason given was rife homosexuality at probation stations. Wilmot's reputation was to be cleared, but this came after his death. Ill-health beset him from at least 1845, and with some fluctuations continued until his death in Hobart in February 1847, by then Lieutenant-Governor Denison having taken office. Wilmot had left instructions that at his funeral the clergy of all denominations should merge, but in the event Catholic priests took the lead. He had asked that his body be returned to England, but this too was denied. Instead, his corpse has remained in St David's Park. A monument was erected in 1850, and Ms Mickleborough concluded by urging her audience, as they passed thereby to spare a thought for this often misunderstood man.

The President thanked the speaker for a fascinating talk, and the meeting closed at 9.05 pm.

Michael Roe for Secretary

Caroline Homer, President