



Paper No. 52

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The Hon. Sir John Robertson K.C.M.G. 1816-1891

On the 15 October 1816 at Bow (home of the Bow Bells) near London, England, a fourth child was born to James Robertson, watchmaker and pastoralist, and his wife Anna Maria(Ripley). The baby boy was the couple's third son and they named him John.

James was a friend of Bro. Sir Thomas Brisbane, Governor of New South Wales. Acting on Sir Thomas's advice James and family emigrated to New South Wales aboard the "Providence" which arrived in Sydney on 8 January 1822. He was appointed superintendent of Government clocks and also worked as a watchmaker and silversmith.

He was granted 86 acres on the northern shores of Sydney Harbour which he named Robertson Point (Cremorne) where he took up residence, he had previously resided at Castlereagh St. Sydney. He also acquired a property in the Hunter River District at Jerry's Plains.

His son, John, began his formal education at Mr. McLeod's School in Phillip Street, Sydney, and then J. Bradley's school. In 1826 he became the first pupil at Dr. J. D. Lang's school and completed his school education firstly with J. Gilchrist and then with W. T. Cope.

John's informal education developed as he gained an intimate knowledge of the streets of Sydney and also by sailing on Sydney Harbour. He was adopted by the native born youth of the town as one of their own.

He had been born with a cleft palate and although this made his speech abnormal, and he consequently suffered some juvenile taunts and mockery by some adults in later life, he retained the loyalty and friendship of his young friends who appreciated his personality and love of life. Despite his handicap he developed a command of the spoken word including, what was to be described in later life as 'the voice and profane language of a bullocky'.

In 1833 against his parents' wishes he worked his passage to England aboard a ship named "Sovereign". He carried letters of introduction, including one from James Day, a convict servant assigned to Robertson Snr., to Day's mother who was a friend of Lord Palmerston. He spent three days on the Palmerston estate. Another, a letter to Governor Sir Richard Bourke, he simply posted.

While in England he studied both navigation and farming techniques, inspected the dockyards at Plymouth, and visited several coastal towns. He travelled to both Scotland and France before returning to New South Wales, visiting Brazil and other South American countries en route.

On his return to New South Wales, in 1835, although he would have preferred to continue a career at sea, he joined his father on a property at Plashett, Jerry's Plains in the Hunter River district. Here he gained valuable experience as a station manager. He also explored some of the land to the north-west of the Hunter, crossing the Liverpool Plains to the Namoi River and then down the Darling River to the site of the present day town of Bourke.

