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PREPARED and PRESENTED BY: G.H. Cumming.

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Bro. THOMAS McVITIE (1781 - 1833)

Thomas McVitie, merchant and banker, was born at Dumfries, Scotland. After some years in Cape Colony and Mauritius, he arrived in New South Wales in 1816 with a cargo of merchandise and set himself up as a merchant in Sydney. He was principally a wholesale importer but developed interests in whaling and in the export of timber. He appears to have established himself quickly in the commercial life of the colony, for he was one of the 'principal merchants' invited to the meeting which led to the formation of the Bank of New South Wales only a few months after his arrival. Governor Macquarie appointed him a magistrate in February, 1821.

He decided to settle permanently in the colony and applied for a land grant in 1821, pledging to invest 2,000 to 3,000 pounds in stock and improvements. He received 1000 acres in the Camden district as a new settler. In 1825 he bought 2000 acres of crown land near the Shoalhaven. He was a foundation member of the Agricultural Society of New South Wales, formed in 1822, and in the same year signed the memorial submitted by members to Henry, 3rd Earl Bathurst the British Secretary for the colonies, protesting against the heavy English import duty on colonial wool. He became one of the few colonial shareholders of the Australian Agricultural Co., his one vote indicating an investment of more than 1000 pounds.

His association with the members of the 'exclusive' group of officers and free settlers was important in his later career. After taking part in the initial moves in 1817 to establish the Bank of New South Wales and becoming an original shareholder, Macvitie was elected to the board of directors in 1821 and re-elected in 1823. He resigned from the board in 1826 when he was elected managing director of the new Bank of Australia, which opened for business at his house in Bligh Street in July 1826. The leading spirit behind this second bank in New South Wales was John Macarthur who, with a small group which included Macvitie, organised its formation; most of its first directors were shareholders of the Australian Agricultural Co. It was an 'exclusive' institution, 'the pure merino bank' in the words of the publication, *The Monitor*. No public offer of shares was made and it was said that at least half the shares went to 'settlers' and most of the remainder to civil and military officers.

The bank quickly moved to premises in George Street where, in September 1828, thieves entered the premises by a drain and stole 12,000 pounds in banknotes and silver. It was Australia's first bank robbery.

Macvitie gave up his importing business to manage the new bank which entered immediately into aggressive competition with the older institution. It was not an easy period because of the dollar export crisis and the depression of the late 1820s. Macvitie was affected personally by the slump and drought, and in 1828 successfully sought postponement of payment on instalments due for land he had bought.

Macvitie was a vice-president of the Benevolent Society. As a leading Presbyterian he was active in the foundation of Scots Church, and later became a trustee with Rev. J.D. Lang and David Ramsay. His position as a prominent citizen was marked by his inclusion in the warrant of 1829 as one of the reserves for nomination to the Legislative Council in the event of a vacancy.

At Scots Church on 3 August 1826 Macvitie had married Ann, who was born in the colony about 1790, daughter of Joseph and Ann Jones; they had three sons and one daughter born between 1820 and 1825. He died on 3rd February 1833, his wife surviving until 1875.

Details of Macvitie's early life are unknown, however, in New South Wales, although not conspicuously wealthy, he seems to have been accepted as a person of sufficient social status and personal ability to become in a short time a leader of the mercantile community and a magistrate, and to have been well liked and respected. He took no prominent part in the political questions which agitated the colony in the 1820s. A sober and competent man of business, his most important achievement was his successful management of the Bank of Australia during its first years.

Bro. Thomas Macvitie was a member of the Lodge of Social and Military Virtues No. 227, Irish Constitution, held within the 46th Regiment although he, like other 'exclusives' who were admitted to the lodge while the regiment was in Sydney from 1814 to 1818, had no military connection with the regiment.

Bro. Macvitie participated in the procession at the setting of the foundation stone of Bro. Captain John Piper's villa at Point Eliza (now Point Piper) on 2nd November 1816. He was the bearer of a pitcher of wine for use in the ceremony.

REFERENCES:-

- * R. F. Holder, Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol.2, 1788 - 1850, General Editor Douglas Pike, Melbourne University Press, 1967.
 - * Historical records of Australia Vol. 1, 10 - 16.
 - * Grand Lodge of Ireland records of the Lodge of Social and Military Virtues No. 227.
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