

Ralph Darling

(19 December 1825 – 22 October 1831)

Brian Fletcher

A regime turbulent but constructive

Ralph Darling's term as Governor of New South Wales was characterised by developments that had unfortunate consequences for his reputation. Particularly important was the heightening of tensions long inherent in a colony peopled both by convicts undergoing punishment and by migrants and emancipists seeking to better themselves. The combination worked well so long as the free were few in number, interested mainly in promoting their livelihood and willing to exchange the advantages of cheap land and convict labour for the drawbacks of living in a highly regimented society. This ceased to be the case during the years in which Governor Brisbane held office, by which time growing numbers of settlers, free as well as freed, had put down roots and were beginning to assert their full rights as British citizens. To achieve this end, the existing autocratic system of government, designed to serve the purposes of a penal settlement, needed to be liberalised and the legal system changed to allow for the use of juries. Some colonists, however, accepted the existing system, amongst them the associates of John Macarthur and conservatively minded migrants who had arrived in growing numbers after the Napoleonic Wars. Their views were shared by the Colonial Office in London which sought to maintain the discipline essential to a convict establishment and ensure that New South Wales operated effectively as an outlet for unwanted felons. This helped create a tense situation in which sections of the colonists were pitted against each other, and advocates of reform were brought into conflict with the authorities in London.¹

Unwittingly, Darling, whose responsibilities were to the Colonial Office, became embroiled in a struggle which was not of his making, but which nevertheless affected his image and obscured many of his achievements. All too often he found himself defending the status quo with the result that contemporary and later exponents of the Whig view of history

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stature. By contrast, as a colonial Governor, both in Mauritius and New South Wales, he attracted considerable opprobrium. To some extent this was a consequence of his conservative political views, autocratic behaviour, inflexible attitudes and insensitivity to the opinions of those with whom he disagreed. Yet he had also been placed in a difficult situation by the unwillingness of the British Government to introduce constitutional reform and by the vehemence of the opposition that came from colonists who sought power for themselves and the interests they represented. Nature also conspired against him in the shape of a severe drought that struck the colony in 1828 and 1829. As if this was not enough, the end of what has been labelled Australia's first trade cycle in 1826 and 1827 brought major setbacks particularly to commercial interests.⁵⁰ Despite this, Darling persevered. Politically the colony may have been more deeply divided than when he arrived, but in other respects it had advanced providing a legacy from which Richard Bourke was able to benefit.

Notes

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- 5 For Darling's military career, see Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, pp 1-27.
- 6 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, p 13.
- 7 Fletcher, BH, "Elizabeth Darling: Colonial Benefactress and Governor's Lady", in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society (JRAHS)*, vol 67 pt 4, March 1982, pp 297-327.
- 8 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, p 229ff.
- 9 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, p 336.
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- 12 Quoted in Bennett, JM, *Sir Francis Forbes: First Chief Justice of New South Wales 1823-1837*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2001, p 80.
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- 24 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, p 103ff.
- 25 Fletcher, BH, "Elizabeth Darling", pp 310-14.
- 26 *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, vol 2, MUP, Melbourne, 1967; Harris, J, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity, A Study of Hope*, Albatross Books, Sydney, 1990, pp 53-9.
- 27 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, pp 183-90.
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- 38 Melbourne, *Early Constitutional Development*, p 125ff.
- 39 See especially Bennett, JM, *Sir Francis Forbes*, p 83ff.
- 40 Currey, pp 351ff; Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, pp 270-4.
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- 42 Fletcher, *A Governor Maligned*, pp 263-4.
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