

# SIR RICHARD DRY

by

Reg. A. Watson



Certainly one of the most esteemed people in Tasmania's history would be Sir Richard Dry. A philanthropist, he was a humane and understanding man. Although he knew great wealth, even though he went through very difficult financial periods, the general community loved him. A large cortege followed his funeral procession from Hobart to his final resting place at Hagley village on the island's north west coast. At every town on the way, the cortege stopped so that the locals would pay their respects.

Sir Richard had a number of achievements; he was, for an example, the first native born to sit in the Legislative Council and the first Speaker of the Legislative Council. He was also the first Tasmanian to be knighted and the first Tasmanian-born Premier. Four distinctions. He was also a great horse racing fan.

His term of office saw some of his popularity wane, as he had to tackle difficult decisions and refrain from endorsing popular ones. However, the diminishing of his esteem by the people was short lived.

Dry existed through some amazing times in the colony's history, from being a raw and vulgar society to one of self-government and in general, despite economic setbacks, prosperous. He involved himself vigorously in the convict anti-transportation movement. Although he was not a founding member of the movement, he soon became one of its main leaders. Transportation finally ceased in May 1853.

His is an amazing story. A son of a convict he rose to the highest office in the colony.

His father, also Richard, was son of an Irish farmer of County Wexford. Although a Protestant he got involved with the 'troubles' of 1798 and was sentenced to transportation for political reasons. He arrived, as a convict after a time on Norfolk Island, in 1807 to Port Dalrymple and was pardoned in 1809. He had already married

Anne Lyons at York Town.(see postscript). Anne was born in Sydney and was a free woman. Col Paterson had appointed him storekeeper at Port Dalrymple in 1807 and praised him as a man of honesty, ability and integrity.

He received the admiration and favour of Governor Lachlan Macquarie who granted him 500 acres of land adding to what already he had. He left the Government service in 1818. Richard senior was to become one of the leading landowners in the colony, having more than 12,000 acres in the north of the colony, naming his main property, where he lived, Quamby, possibly an aboriginal word meaning, “*a place to camp or a resting place*”<sup>i</sup>.

He was a respected citizen becoming one of the founders of the Cornwall Bank and of the Tamar Steam Navigation Company.

Son Richard was born in June 1815 in Charles Street, Launceston. Eventually there would be five children in the family. His father believed strongly in providing a sound education for his children. “Dickie” – as Richard was called – was sent to various private schools in the colony. Richard senior was a wealthy man and decided to send Dickie off to England, India and Mauritius, to broaden his knowledge and to round off his education. Just before attaining 21 years of age, he returned to rural, tranquil Tasmania.



The house on Elphin Farm in 2018. This would not be the house where Richard was born.

It was planned that Richard would manage the property *Quamby* with father, but he also took a keen interest in local politics and in the social life of the colony. He became a good sportsman. He attracted the eye of the Governor, Sir John Franklin, who made Richard a Commissioner of Peace when he was only 22 years old. Six years later, his father died (his mother was already dead) leaving his son ownership of his estate with its many buildings and assets.

Richard Dry was now a wealthy, admired young man who clearly had a brilliant future.

Governor Franklin had gone and was replaced by Governor Sir John Eardley-Wilmot who recommended that Dry be a ‘non official’ member of the Legislative Council, thus starting off his political career. Eardley-Wilmot came when all the Australian colonies were experiencing financial hardship. This was somewhat made worse when the Mother Country informed the colonial governments that they must share a greater cost of the convict system. Convict transportation had arrived to Van Diemen’s Land

(VDL) in 1803 and was continuing at a high rate. Eardley-Wilmot's government faced bankruptcy.

To raise funds to service this nightmare, the Governor in 1845 proposed increased taxes on tea, sugar and other imported necessities. Even though there was strong opposition he felt he had little option, but to push through legislation. This prompted uproar with Richard Dry a main opponent of the Bill. Despite an appeal to London, the Colonial Office judged that the Governor had every right to implement such legislation.

The result was that six non-official members were dismissed from the Council, including Dry. Nonetheless, their action had the admiration of the general free population and the press dubbed them as the "Patriotic Six". Dry, returning to Launceston, was treated as a hero. Eventually Eardley-Wilmot was dismissed on the orders from London\* and was replaced by Sir William Denison. Dry and his colleagues were able to be reappointed to the Legislative Council. They had won their case when the British Government withdrew their plan not to pay for the upkeep of the convict system.

The issue did bring to the fore the matter of convict transportation and the success of the "Patriotic Six" heralded the start of its demise. Dry had sided with those opposing transportation and showed that he was a man of principle and leadership.

Until the cessation of transportation, VDL was to receive up to 70,000 convicts to its shores from 1803 to 1853. In the mid 1840s, convicts were now being received not just from Britain, but also from Sydney when transportation stopped to the colony of NSW. In 1848 *The Australasian League* was formed, with its aim, the complete cessation of transportation. Yet there was major opposition, despite public endorsement of the League. The Governor, Sir William Denison, was supportive of continual transportation as it provided cheap labour for public works and on the farms. He also saw a massive labour shortage if it came to a sudden end.

Public outcry against transportation was gaining momentum. While Dry was not an original signatory to the League, he soon took a leading role in its operations. He, being one of the leading colonists, gave much weight to its ultimate success.

The first meeting of the League was held at the Cornwall Hotel Launceston with James Cox, a large landowner, in the Chair. Hobart Town soon followed suit. Still, the convicts came with 21 convict ships arriving in the year of 1848. The League was well organised and with the support of many influential colonists it became quite powerful.

In 1851 the first elections ever were held in VDL. The Legislative Council provided twenty four seats, sixteen of which were to be elected by the people and eight nominated by the Crown. *The Australasian League* put up nineteen candidates out of the twenty seven that stood. In all, only four candidates stated their support for the continuation of transportation. Dry stood for the seat of Launceston. On the day of the election his supporters crowded in and outside of the Cornwall Hotel and press statements report that there were thousands. A scuffle broke out during the time. The following day a dinner was held in Dry's honour, but not all were happy with his

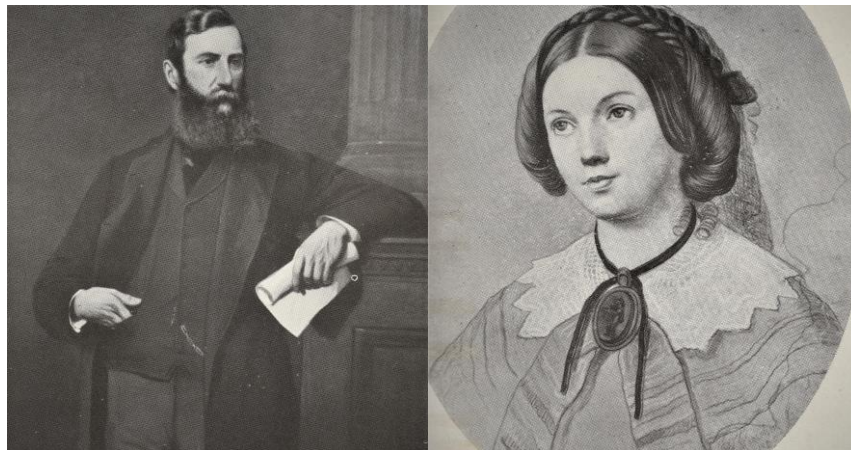
election. While eating their dinner a volley of stones came through the windows, striking the walls and ceiling and falling on the tables breaking much of the crockery.

The successful election of League members and supporters to the Legislative Council, saw such outstanding colonists as Michael Fenton, (landowner and historian); Thomas Daniel Chapman (later Premier), major graziers such as Joseph Archer, James Cox, W. Archer and R.G. Kermode.

In 1852, Governor Denison was defeated on the issue when the Council voted successfully for its cessation. London endorsed the will of the colonists. By this time, the last batch from England had already left, arriving in 1853. Now that this scourge had been abolished, it was time to change the name from Van Diemen's Land to Tasmania and establish full Responsible Government. (both in 1856). In 1853, Richard had married Clara Meredith.

The time leading up to his Premiership in 1866, Dry lived a full life, although not an entirely healthy one. In 1855 he left for England after selling much of the land of *Quamby* and other assets such as his library and furniture. He was in England for some time, long enough to be knighted by Queen Victoria in May 1858. He was the first colonial born Tasmanian to receive this honour. In his absence he was nominated for a northern seat in the new House of Assembly in the Tasmanian Parliament. However, he did not stand.

In 1860 he and Clara returned to Tasmania and he was successfully elected to the Legislative Council, now the Upper House. He returned with zeal for the development of railway and supported the first line in Tasmania, the Launceston-Deloraine scheme.



Sir Richard and Clara. Photo: Queen Victoria Museum Launceston

Dry became Premier, on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1866. His ministry was the smallest since the introduction of Responsible Government and probably has been ever since. Despite Dry's great personal popularity the decisions he had to make saw him lose some support. Business activity was low throughout the colony and there was a need to cut government expenditure. Dry and his ministers led the way when they accepted a reduction in their salary. Even though Dry was for railway expansion at that point of time he felt the colony could ill afford to finance the railway line between Hobart and Launceston. Therefore he opposed it and endured a great deal of criticism. Yet he

established telegraphic communication with Victoria by laying a cable under Bass Strait.

The strain of office began to show and it was quite clear he was a very sick man. Sir Richard Dry died 1<sup>st</sup> August 1869 after a short illness. The author believes this is another '*first*' for Dry, although a sad one, being the first Tasmanian Premier to die in Office.

One of the most interesting aspects of his Premiership was with the death of the last full blooded male Tasmanian aborigine, William Lanne (Lanna- also referred to as King Billy) in March 1869. What followed was probably the most explosive scandal Tasmania has ever seen.

Lanne died March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1869, aged 33, at the Dog and Partridge Hotel in Goulburn Street, Hobart.

There were strong moves by the Royal Society to obtain the body for scientific study. Dry gave specific instruction to the Medical Officer of the Hobart General Hospital, Dr G. Stokell to take great care. Dry had a guard placed at his grave of the body to see that it was not touched or mutilated in any way. Despite this, Lanne's body was mutilated before burial and after burial, his body was secretly exhumed late at night and mutilated further. It would appear there was some competition between Dr Stokell, who boned Lanne's body and Dr William Crowther who wanted to send Lanne's parts, particularly his skull, to the Royal Society of Surgeons in London. The public was outraged with rumours that Lanne was no longer in his coffin. Upon opening his coffin, indeed, he was nowhere to be found. It would appear the order of Dry's to place a guard was not followed through by the police. The public asked the Colonial Secretary for an Inquiry to determine where he was, but Premier Dry refused on the ground he felt it unwise to investigate further.

The last Tasmanian female full blooded in Tasmania (but not elsewhere) Truganini learnt of how Lanne's body was mutilated and as he was her third husband she was horrified and feared that her body would be treated likewise. As a result, Richard Dry visited Truganini when she was living at Oyster Cove (1) and gave her an assurance that it would not happen to her. Truganini did not suffer the same mutilation but after she was buried, she was soon exhumed and her skeleton was placed on display at the Hobart Museum until 1947.

Dry died at his Hobart home of *Holbrook*, 336 Davey Street, South Hobart. His wife survived him. There were no children. Originally called Holebrook Place it was built in 1846 by Valentine Fleming, an English lawyer who became Chief Justice in 1846.



Holebrook, 2020. Reg Watson photo



Sir Richard Dry's gravestone, Hagley Church.

On the morning of the funeral procession to Hagley to be buried in his church of St Mary's CofE businesses in Hobart were closed. The church at Hagley was one of Dry's many projects. Built in 1861 it originally did not have the spire which was not added until 1932. He also had the adjacent rectory built.



St Mary's Hagley Notice the spire.

The Governor, Charles Du Cane, led the procession to the outskirts of the city and from there the funeral proceeded slowly to Launceston, stopping at the towns on the way, so that the people could offer their respects. The cortege finally arrived at Hagley, where Dry was buried inside the church. In 1871 a chancel was built over the grave. Lady Dry died in May 1904 in England, where she had gone to live after his death.

Sir Richard Dry was one of the most popular, admired and outstanding men of Tasmania.

END

\* Sir Eardley-Wilmot after being dismissed retired into private life remaining in VDL. He died February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1847 and was buried with full honours in Hobart.

Reg. A. Watson has written on a number of early Tasmanian politicians. Sir Richard Dry is one whom he admires. *“His service was truly to Tasmania and to the people,”* states Mr Watson. *“Dry had to make difficult and unpopular decisions as he thought necessary. Nonetheless, he is greatly remembered for his dedication to the Office and to the independent colony of Tasmania.”*

Post script. There are erroneous reports that Richard's father married Anne Maugham in Sydney. She was, however, already married and did not know Richard.

(1). John Strange Dandridge was appointed Superintendent of Aborigines at Oyster Cove where he met Trucanini. It was he and wife Matilda who took care of Trucanini after she had left Oyster Cove. They lived in a house near to the corner of Harrington and Macquarie Streets.

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<sup>i</sup> Nigel Burch in his book, *Our First Hero* Premier Sir Richard Dry, states on p 41 that it could have, instead, originated in Yorkshire, England where there is a place called Quamby, pre-dating local exploration.

Recommended reading:

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- *The Life and Times of Sir Richard Dry*. By A.B. Baker. (1951)
  - *Our First Hero*. By Nigel Burch. (2019)