

Oatley Heritage & Historical Society Projects.

Month & Year of Topic

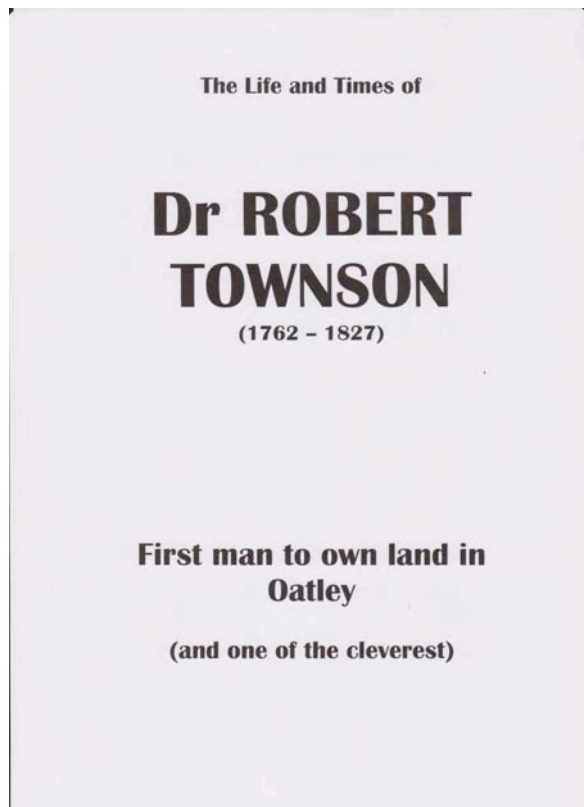
Topic

*Written & Spoken
Presenters*

November 2015

Robert Townson

Julian Sheen



Who was he?

“Own” to privately, individually control, privatize – non public land

Major Sources

Brian Madden	The Background to the Townson Grants	1977
V E W Goodin	Townson, Robert Australian Dictionary of Biography	1967
Hugh Torrens	Robert Townson an all too long forgotten Salopian	2010

Birth

Born (christened) 2nd April 1762 in Richmond Surrey to John Townson merchant. It seems he was illegitimate

Context

Seven Years War –

Industrial Revolution - Technology N Ferguson – four great inventions in 1760s:

The longitude finding chronometer (Harrison 1761)

The advanced steam engine (Watt 1764)

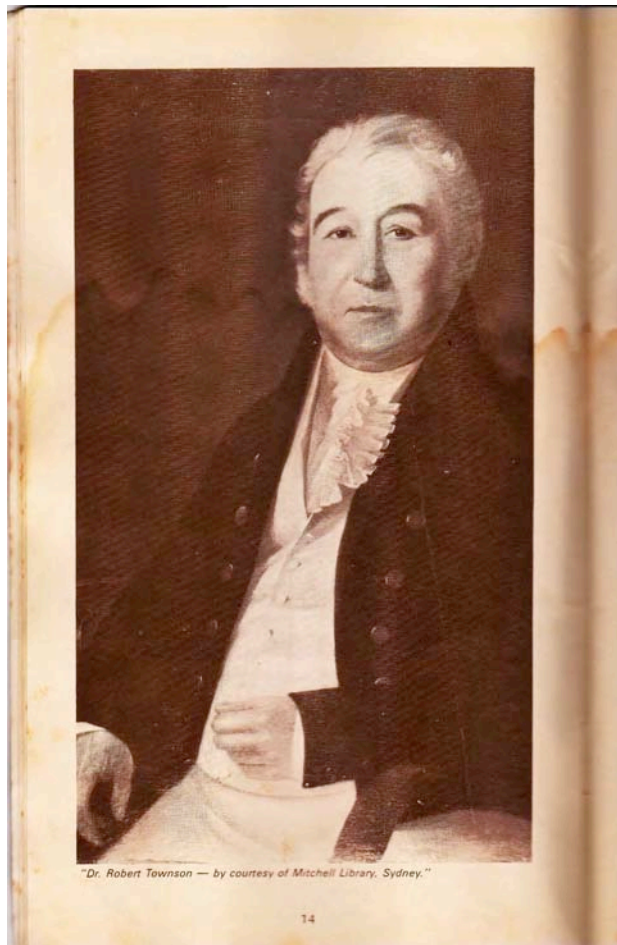
The spinning jenny (Hargraves 1766)

The water frame – vital for spinning cotton (Arkwright 1769)

Production of iron

It was also the Age of Enlightenment

Science – Medicine (aspirin), Salicylic acid Edward Stone (1763) Physics (electricity). Astronomy, Biology Geology, Curiosity, categories, rational explanations and understandings Why is it so? Enormous curiosity tempered with a bias of reason: the need to understand the vast array of natural phenomena. Linnaean Society



Robert Townson moved to Shropshire to live with his sister when his father died in 1773. She was married to a country cleric. Townson began a career in the mercantile business in Manchester where there was money to be made but he could not stick at it. 1776 to 1783

QUOTE 1783 – *“I set to estimate the difference between sacrificing for at least the best years of my life everything that afforded me pleasure to the probable increase of my fortune by continuing in trade; or resolving at once to manage it with such economy as should enable me to pursue the path my inclination pointed out.”* (HT)

So he decided to follow his muse to become a naturalist. In 1783 he set off to walk from Shropshire to Sicily studying biology, geology and the action of volcanoes on the way.

1785 On the way home from Sicily he enrolled in the University of Paris to study geology.

1788 he was back in Shropshire continuing his study of geology at the local, county level. He also spent more time in Paris.

QUOTE Observation- *His pockets contained a little linen, a sledge hammer to break rocks in search of fossils, a tin case to preserve the insects he should catch and an instrument for catching butterflies etc. At his back he slung a large portfolio strapped between two boards to press plants in and a gun in his hand* (HT)

1789 Townson walked to Edinburgh and enrolled in Edinburgh University to study Medicine, Chemistry and Biology. Edinburgh at the time was at the height of the Enlightenment. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh but his financial position was precarious. His library records show he was a voracious reader. Townson intended to become a surgeon but struggled with the fees. He pursued geology, chemistry and botany, natural history as well as anatomy and surgery

1791 Townson enrolled at the University of Goettingen in Germany as a student of natural history.

1792 he read a paper on the perceptivity of plants to the Linnaean Society in London. Then he took a year off his studies in Goettingen and travelled extensively mainly by foot in the Hapsburg Empire visiting Vienna and spending much time in Hungary. He then returned to Goettingen where he published his first book, in Latin, on the physiology of reptiles.

1795 Townson returned to Edinburgh in July, then back to Shropshire where a neighbour noted:

QUOTE *His manners having been formed aboard are quite foreign, so is his accent. He carried a bird in each pocket in oval tin boxes as well as a tortoise and a toad in his portmanteau.* (HT).

1796

Awarded an LL.D (Doctor of Laws) honorary doctorate, from the University of Edinburgh based on his authorship.

Townson then wrote several more books which appeared in Latin, English, French, German, Dutch and Hungarian

Titles included

Travels in Hungary (1797)- including an account of climbing the Tatra mountains (2500m) which he measured barometrically.

Other books

Philosophy of Mineralogy (1798)

Tracts and Observations on Natural History (1799)

A Poor Man's Moralists (1800) which was a collection of moral aphorisms intended to be sold cheaply to help "improve" the working classes. It went to five editions

Late 1790s - He sought posts as a Government naturalist in Canada, also Africa - Sierra Leone and India: biologist/geologist but was unsuccessful. He had not completed a degree and it appears he could not acquire a patron. He sent gifts of insect collections and later dedicated one of his books to Georgina, Duchess of Devonshire at Chatsworth which she accepted but she would not support him in his career. Townson also sought out Sir Joseph Banks who became a friend but not a patron.

Townson was a disappointed man; his scientific career was going nowhere. In June 1800 he wrote

QUOTE *since my disappointment in my projected survey of India I have turned my attention to other branches of knowledge*

He then became itinerant travelling extensively in Britain but clearly was looking for a new avenue for his interest and energy.

LONDON 1802



AUSTRALIA

Over the next few years Townson considered his options and concluded that he should emigrate to the colony of NSW at Sydney Cove. What was the background to his decision?

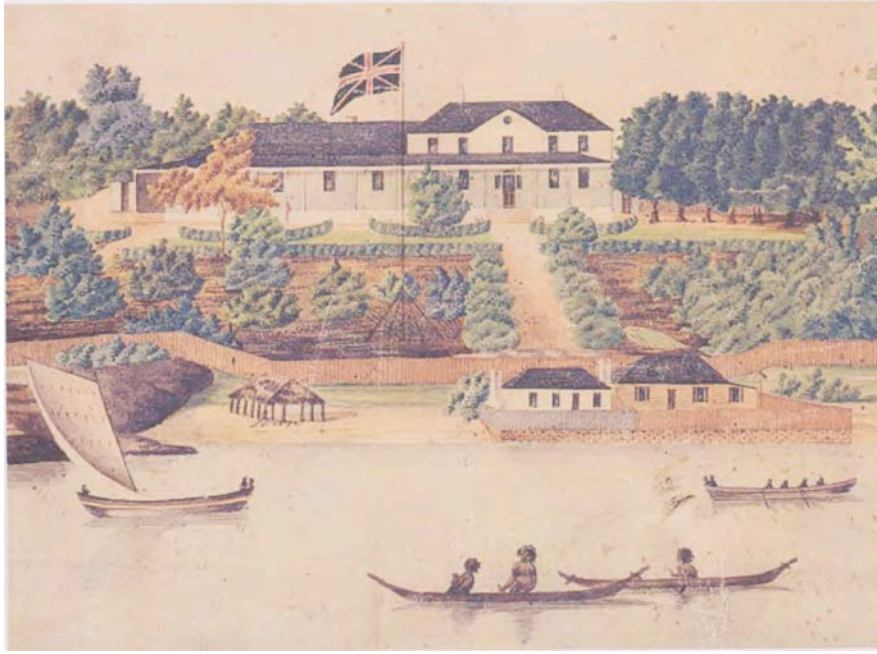
Robert Townson was not unfamiliar with the colony which was less than twenty years old. His older brother John (1760 -1835) had spent several years in the colony at Sydney Cove and Norfolk Island. John was a captain on the NSW Corps, he sailed to Australia in the 2nd Fleet.

In 1803 John Townson sold his commission while on leave in London. But, a few years after, he returned to Sydney deciding to come back as a settler. John Townson obtained letters from the Colonial Office promising him a grant of 2000 acres on his arrival. The amount of 2000 acres appears quite large.

On 6th August 1806 John Townson arrived back in Sydney. Also on board his ship was the new governor William Bligh who had orders to get the NSW Corps under control.

Bligh refused to acknowledge John's land grants without official word from London; Townson and Townson thought of returning to England.

1807 GOVERNMENT HOUSE



Robert Townson meanwhile had discussed the advantages of a new life in the NSW colony with his brother and on a number of occasions called at Sir Joseph Banks door who he regarded as a friend and possible if unreliable patron. Townson also met and discussed prospects in the late 1790s with Col. William Paterson an officer of the NSW Corps. Paterson returned to Sydney Cove in 1799 as Lieutenant Governor with orders to stamp out the rum trade by officers of the NSW Corps...

Robert Townson's mother died in May 1805. This may have triggered his decision for he was tired of England; by November 1806 he decide to emigrate to Australia as a scientific settler; he had already burnt his correspondence in 1805 and, equipped with a similar letter to his brother ie a promise of a grant of 2000 acres, he sought passage to NSW leaving England in December 1806.

Townson arrived on *Young William* on 6th July 1807 (that is, a year after John) to find his brother disheartened by the Governor and considering a return to England. Robert was to receive similar treatment from Governor William Bligh ie a refusal to grant the land to which he thought he was entitled. Townson was now 46. The Townson brothers were hungry for land. They sought a supporting decision from London, this clearly took time.

Robert Townson also found Bligh's attitude to his aspirations to develop science and explore the hinterland of the colony wholly negative. Townson supported the opinion in the colony that something had to be done about Bligh.

QUOTE *This is the most unhappy country that a quiet, peaceable Philosopher could have come to. (HT)*

1808 – George Johnston - Frontier Mentality

A few months later - 26th January 1808 Governor Bligh was deposed - arrested by Major George Johnston and officers NSW Corps, Johnston had been part of the Marine Corps in the first fleet and Governor Phillip's aide de camp. The military had the Townson brothers' support.

The colony was in the hands of Major Johnston of the NSW Corps who had deposed Bligh and assumed the role of temporary Lieutenant Governor. (Lieutenant Governor Paterson was absent from Sydney; he was in Van Diemen's Land setting up a colony at Port Dalrymple).

Bligh was confined to Government house with his daughter even though the worst that the officers could condemn Bligh for was: "being ill-tempered". He refused to return to England till he was properly relieved. Bligh however sailed to Hobart

What about his land? Townson wrote:

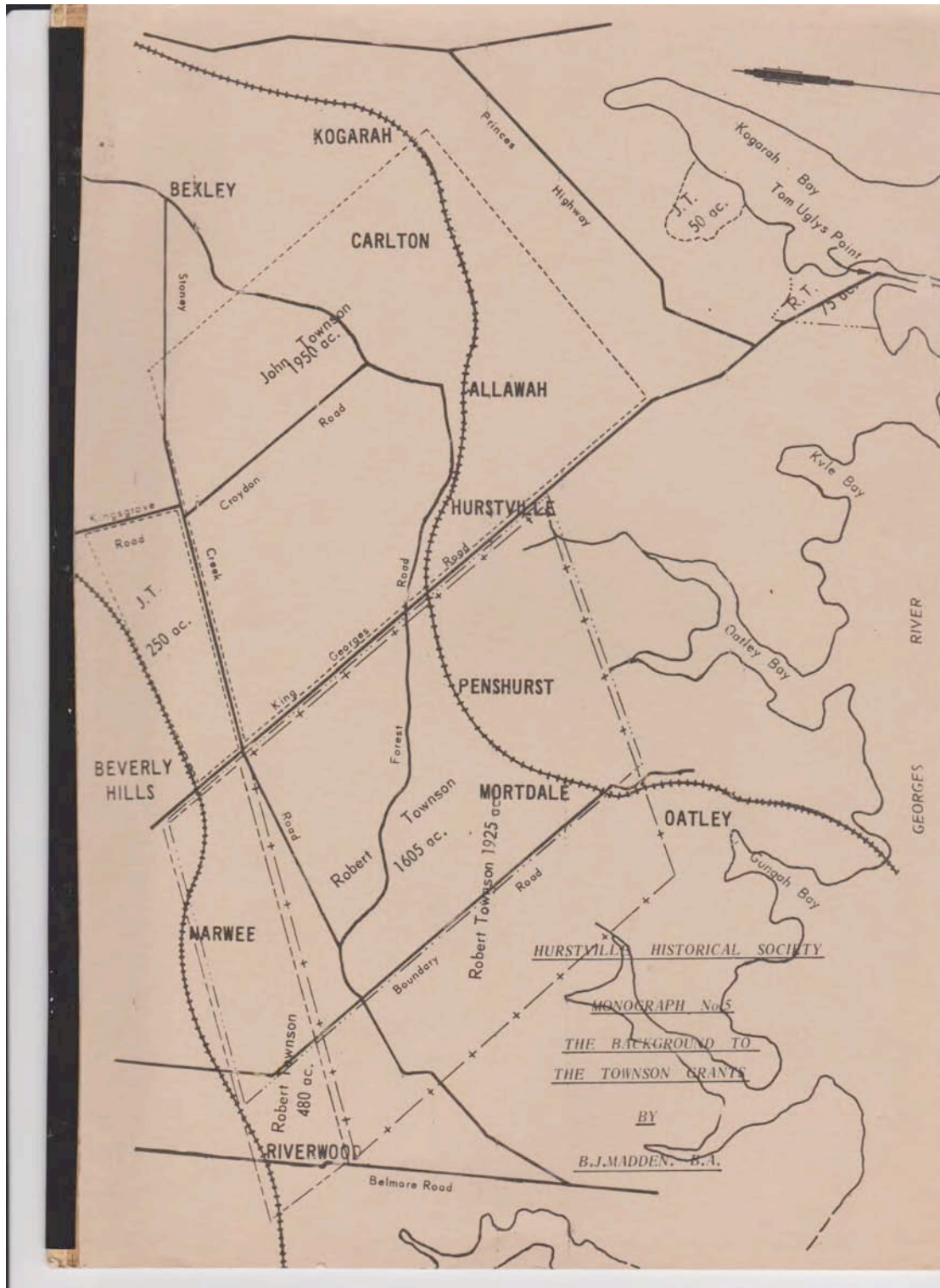
QUOTE *before the arrest of Governor Bligh I requested to have my 2000 acres in two separate farms, one near Georges River, the other at Emu Island (on the Nepean).*

He also wrote to Secretary of State for War and the Colonies Viscount Castlereagh

QUOTE— *"Bligh had (before his arrest) suffered my brother, after waiting a year and a half to take his 2000 acres together (without a grant) near Georges River*

In July 1808 Major Joseph Foveaux who had been an officer in the NSW Corps in the 1790s arrived back from England in the role of Lieutenant Governor to find Governor Bligh under arrest. Foveaux relieved Major Johnston and waited for Colonel Paterson, Foveaux assumed control of the colony, trying not to side with either party while waiting for Paterson to return from Port Dalrymple.

The Townson Land Grants 1808



1st November 1808

Finally Robert Townson got his grants in the District of Botany Bay as it was called. The grants were signed by Lieutenant Governor Foveaux on 1st November 1808. One grant was 1925 acres with four corners King Georges Road and Stony Creek Road; King Georges Road and Hurstville Road the corner of Gungah Bay Road and Douglas Haig St and Belmore Road and Clarendon Road Riverwood. Townson also received 75 acres at Tom Ugly's point.

The Townson brothers must have been familiar with the country of the north shore of Georges River probably by boat sailing up Lime Kiln Bay and even Dairy Creek

On 1st January 1809 Col. Paterson returned from administering Port Dalrymple in northern Van Diemen's Land and took up his post as acting Governor while waiting intervention from London. Foveaux remained at his post assisting Paterson, Paterson was not well.

1809

But Townson was unhappy with his grant and had the grant added to:-

QUOTE Townson *On the assumption of power by Colonel Paterson (01/01/1809) I made the same request (ie his land be split between Botany Bay and the west of Sydney), this was first granted but afterwards Colonel Paterson ordered me to take all my land together near Georges River wanting to give the Emu Island grant to his son.*

QUOTE Townson

From this circumstance (ie having to take all his land together) my land was extended into the very worst ground, neither fit for cultivation nor grazing and out of 2000 acres I suppose I did not possess a thousand that was any use to me. I stated this to Colonel Foveaux on his taking the government of the colony into his hands, and requested he give me some adjoining land which being more open was more fit, or rather less unfit for sheep and this consisted of a range of hills of 480 acres. (north west of his earlier grant (Granted 7th April 1809).

Government House 1809



Then, on 1st November 1809 and at Townson's request, his grant of 1925 acres (including Oatley) that was granted on 1st November 1808 and the 480 acre grant of

7th April 1809 were cancelled by Col. Paterson. Townson was immediately granted 1605 acres north of Boundary Road. His second grant was 1000 acres at Minto. Townson retained his small allotments of 75 acres at Tom Ugly's Point.

That is, Townson's control over, or ownership of part of Oatley was terminated at his request. He had owned the land for exactly twelve months.

Townson: QUOTE *"I had found by sad experience that all my land and all the country around from being covered with wood was unfit for sheep and I was obliged to send my flock to another person's ground in a distant part. I therefore a few months ago requested that Colonel Paterson would allow me to exchange 800 of my 2000 acres for some more open land in a distant part of the colony. This farm Colonel Paterson kindly extended to 1000 acres"*.

The land Townson had in mind was very well suited for his pasturing purposes, he had done his homework. The estate was located in beautiful rolling countryside known as the Scenic Hills near Minto between Cowpasture Road (Camden Valley Way) and Campbelltown Road. It was described at the time as "by far the best pasturage in the colony including noble and extensive views of the surrounding countryside from the top of Bunbury Curran Hill on the estate.

This is where Dr Townson settled on a property he called Varro Ville (after the Roman writer on agriculture Marcus Terentius Varro).

The south west of Sydney became the birthplace of Australian pastoral industry.

NB attempts by Townson to elicit the support of Secretary of State Castlereagh would at this time been hampered by distance but also by the fact that on 21st September 1809 Castlereagh fought a duel with fellow cabinet minister George Canning at Putney. Canning who had never fired a shot in his life was wounded and both ministers resigned from the government. The duel was over the Walcheren Expedition.

MACQUARIE



On 31st December 1809 Major Lachlan Macquarie (born the same year as Townson) arrived as Governor aboard HMS *Dromedary*. An army man, he came with his own troops, elements of the 73rd Regiment. The NSW Corps did not resist and was disbanded becoming the 102nd Regiment of Foot, Macquarie took control of the colony.

Paterson set sail for England On 10th May 1810 possibly to face court marshal but died on the voyage home.

Bligh sailed from Hobart to Sydney Hobart but returned to Sydney early in 1810. He set sail for England on 12th May 1810.

Macquarie cancelled all grants issues by the dissident officers and requested all grantees surrender their documents. Dr Townson handed in documents for his grants for 1605 acres at Mortdale etc, 1000 acres at Minto and 75 acres at Tom Ugly's point to Macquarie (totalling by some margin the original promise of 2000 acres).

Townson noted in a letter: *I had a few hundred more acres than were ordered by the Secretary of State but I believe not more than a compensation for a considerable quantity of bad land I still possess.*

1810

Townson became really fed up now with Macquarie and his benevolent dictatorship.

“Dr Townson had already fallen foul of English society, Governor William Bligh and the rebel administration. Now it was Macquarie's turn”.

QUOTE *Tell your parliamentary friends (in England) that the climate and soil here are good but the government is wretched* he wrote in a letter to a friend in Shropshire.(HT)

I have really not time for myself. I have never read so little in all my life since childhood as since I came here. There was a time when I should have looked upon people as little better than barbarians who should be in quiet possession of a very distant country for twenty years without attempting to explore its interior. We know no more than we did twenty years ago. I do not believe that anyone has gone farther inland than was done a few years after the colony was established. I hope, but can hardly hope, for better times. (HT)

Dr Townson was living on his land at Minto and was visited by Gov. Macquarie on 6th November 1810. Macquarie had been in the colony a year and was keen to learn more of the colony.

A month later, 13th December, Macquarie visited John Townson's farm on Kogarah Bay known as the Retreat, and other farms south of Sydney. Governor and Mrs. Macquarie left Parramatta in their carriage at 7am accompanied by several gentlemen. They stopped at Powell's Halfway house (Homebush) then headed east through the woods arriving at Capt Townson's farmhouse at 9.30 am(!).

Macquarie's diary goes on – QUOTE *We found the Captain at home in his very pretty neat clean little cottage where he received us with hospitality and whilst our breakfast (which we had carried along with us was getting ready he showed us his garden which was in excellent order.*

After breakfast we embarked on the water in Capt Townson's boat in order to see his own and his brother Doctor Townson's farm (NB Macquarie acknowledged that the Townsons had control over their land even though they did not yet have documented Grants) which join each other at this place (Carss park). The Doctor's farm we found in miserable bad order with only one solitary hut on it, occupied by two of his indented servants, a man and his wife the latter being very sickly and to all appearance half starved; there were no appearance whatever of any improvement on this farm which is as yet in a state of nature."

Clearly Robert Townson had abandoned interest in his Georges River property focusing his effort and attention on the land at Minto; still his behaviour seems to say the least uncaring.

Macquarie visited other farms in the district in the afternoon (eg Mrs Laycock) and was able to return home to Government House near Circular Quay by 6pm (sound state of the roads)

Then on 20th April 1811 Macquarie announced that the grants of land to replace the surrendered grants would be available from his office from 24th May and that if not collected in two months would be offered to others. Macquarie created conditions, announcing in the Sydney Gazette, that grants could not be sold for five years and that a portion of the land needed to be cleared and cultivated within a set time.

Robert Townson did not collect his documents. He wrote to the Earl of Liverpool outlining his disagreements with various governors. He asked his lordship to order that his grants would have no restrictions placed on them and that he was considering a return to England. (Macquarie was not able to comment on this letter for twelve months).

But, after a change of heart, Townson stated in a letter to Macquarie on 23rd March 1812 that he had taken out two grants – the 1605 acres at Mortdale/Penshurst and the 1000 acres at Minto. He let go the 77 acres on George River –
QUOTE *even tho so beautifully situated...*

Townson asked for indemnification for the 77 acres but Macquarie refused observing that the land had not been improved. Macquarie noted in 1812 "*Possessing a large amount of fertile soil it is a fact that Dr Townson in five years occupancy has not contributed five acres of wheat or other grain to the general consumption of the colony*

In 1812 John Townson sold part of his grant to Simon Lord for 800 pounds.

1813 -1820

In a dispatch to London in 1817 Macquarie listed Townson "among 12 persons who were my secret, discontented though not avowed enemies from whom I have always experienced every opposition" (Blaxland Bros). (BM)

Macquarie wrote at this time "*the frequent, unreasonable and importunate demands of Dr Townson couched in terms highly disrespectful and insulting to me became so troublesome that I found it necessary finally to close further correspondence with him by returning his letters unanswered.*

Robert Townson became a recluse on his farm Varro Ville at Minto and nursed his hostility to Macquarie.

Only when Macquarie resigned and left the colony in 1821 to be succeeded by Thomas Brisbane, did Townson, having decided to stay in the colony, begin to take an active role. He was involved with the short-lived Philosophical Society of Australia in 1822 and was a vice president of the New South Wales Agricultural Society in the same year. It is said that his library was the most extensive in the colony.

Townson was appointed magistrate in 1826. He also helped to establish the Sydney Dispensary which gave free medical attention to the poor.

Townson died in 1827 age 65 on his Minto estate and was buried at Parramatta, his will was not proved however till 28th December 1828.

Townson is said to have left 1600 cattle, 10000 sheep and an excellent vineyard. The Botany Bay (or Mortdale/Penshurst) grant of 1600 acres remained part of his estate in all worth up to 10000 pounds.

Robert Townson's will dated 14th October 1826 gave his address not as Varroville, the name of the house, but Bunbury Curran. Townson gave his qualification as a Doctor of Civil Laws. John Townson inherited a quarter of Robert's estate. Other assets were sent to relatives "residing in some part of Great Britain". One of his executors was John Blaxland a leading and controversial gentlemen settler.

Neither man married though John, who was living in Van Diemen's Land at the time, is known to have had at least two daughters. One who appeared in his will was described as "Sarah Wright, my reputed daughter".

Obituary

Robert Townson was described as a "miserly" character but was praised for his service to the grazing and agriculture interests of the colony. No man has accomplished more in the rearing of stock here. His vineyard was only excelled by one other. (HT)

Described after his death by Katherine Plymley (Shropshire)

Quote: He was one of the most eccentric men I ever knew and one of the most knowledgeable. A singular character whose turn for natural history has led him quite out of the beaten track, who guided by his own industry and spirit of research had acquired much scientific knowledge and made himself known as an able mineralogist and botanist as well as being considerably conversant with other branches of natural history and natural philosophy. (HT)

Varro Ville became a retreat, Captain Charles Sturt, explorer, occupied the house in 1830s. It is now the name of one of the suburbs of Campbelltown and Robert Townson is the name of both a primary school and a connected high school. The original house is gone; the house on the site now dates back to 1859 and is privately owned.

In 1830 John Connell acquired much of Townson's Botany Bay Grant, hence Connell's Point.

An ex convict and clockmaker by the name of James Oatley who was seven years younger than Townson arrived in the colony in 1815 after a life of crime starting in 1806 when he stole a ton of cheese. He began acquiring part of Townson's grants in the Kingsgrove/Georges River district just four years after the death of Robert Townson, it was 1831. He was awarded several grants along the river and associated land over a period 1831- 1835 He died in 1839.

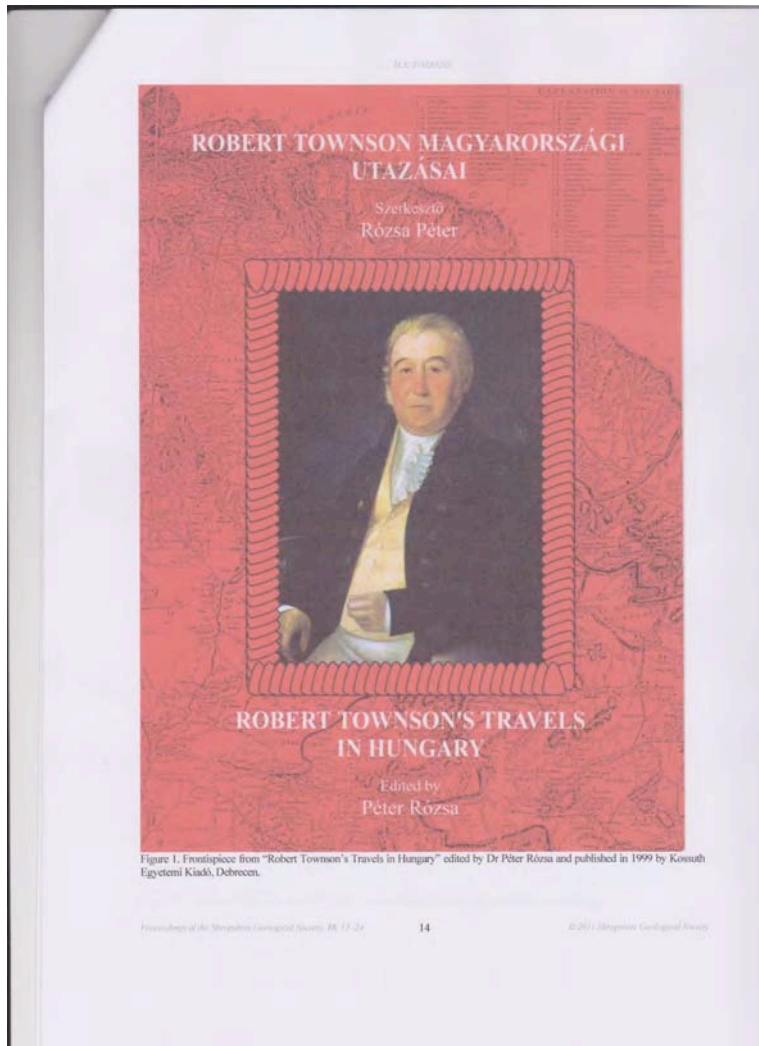
When asked who was the first man granted land in Oatley? people often reply "Well, James Oatley of course".

Not so, Robert Townson's grant was nearly 25 years before Oatley's and he continued to own 1600 acres of land just across Boundary Road till he died.

It is true Townson's ownership in what became part of Oatley was brief, he touched our locality lightly but he was highly significant, he opened the door for massive changes to come.

His portrait, attributed to Augustus Earle, hangs in the Mitchell Library.

Townson in Hungary



In 1999 a one day seminar was held on his life as a scientist and traveller, fifteen papers were presented. The proceedings were recorded in Hungarian and English and edited by Dr Peter Rozsa. An article written in 2010 based on this seminar begins with the words -

QUOTE – *“Robert Townson was a Hungarophile polymath. He has suffered badly in the historical record”*. (a person whose expertise spans a significant number of subject areas, of wide knowledge or learning)

QUOTE *“When he arrived in Sydney in 1807 Townson was most educated man in the colony; a Doctor of Laws, a natural scientist and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh he spoke five languages and was much published.”*
He was “arguably the finest scholar and scientist ever to set foot in the early colony, just the type of man needed to bring a touch of class to the roughneck colony” –

And indeed just the person to be the first man to own land in Oatley!

Julian Sheen
November 2015