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Lachlan Macquarie

(1 January 1810 – 1 December 1821)

Brian Fletcher

A controversial Governor

Lachlan Macquarie is perhaps the most extensively memorialised Governor of New South Wales. His name has, over the past two centuries, been attached *inter alia* to a river, a geographical region, a coastal city, a suburb, numerous streets, a high school, and, in close proximity, a university, a psychiatric hospital, a cemetery, a shopping centre and two railway stations. Bertram Stevens, the literary and art critic, and Sydney Ure Smith, the artist and publisher, writing at the time of the centenary of Macquarie's departure, claimed that the Governor himself had done much to ensure that he was widely remembered. "With the vanity that frequently accompanies greatness", they observed, he has "scattered his name over the map".¹ Since they wrote those words, institutions and places have continued to be named after him. That his achievements are again being recalled on the bicentenary of the opening of his Governorship provides further evidence of his persistent hold over the public consciousness.

Historical memories have been fed by the substantial literature that surrounds Macquarie, initially by amateur writers, but more recently by academic historians. Widely recognised as a figure of major historical significance, Macquarie has also generated controversy dating back to the period of his Governorship. "The references to this many-sided ruler", noted JP McGuanne, an officer in the Lands Department, "are either opulent in praise, or too vindictive in condemnation for an open-minded reader to follow with safety".² These words were penned in 1917 and reflected divisions of opinion sufficiently strong to frustrate attempts three years earlier to "erect a statue or some memorial building", to mark the recently opened Mitchell Library's acquisition of an important collection of Macquarie's diaries and letters.³ Passions remained strong for some

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were based on selective evidence that was not taken under oath. Not surprisingly, many of his adverse comments failed to find support in later scholarly research. Macquarie did have inadequacies, arising in part from his dictatorial behaviour, but he was also a victim of changes in British Government policy that to some extent cut the ground from under his feet. He deserves to be remembered more for his achievements than his personal shortcomings. His deep sense of duty, the comprehensiveness of his policies and above all his singularly enlightened attitude towards former convicts, alike stand out. So too does the way in which he guided the destinies of a previously troublesome colony, helping create the conditions that made for a period of unparalleled growth. Nor should it be forgotten that he was an Army officer of some distinction and a devoted husband and father who cared deeply for each of his two wives, particularly Elizabeth who gladly shared his problems and gave him every support, besides making contributions of her own to colonial life.⁷⁵ The longest serving Governor of New South Wales until the days of Sir Roden Cutler, there is much to justify the attention bestowed on him by posterity.

Notes

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- 2 McGuanne, JP, "Lachlan Macquarie and His times", in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society (JRAHS)*, pt 2, vol 4, 1917, p 49.
- 3 *The Sun*, 7.1.1914.
- 4 Newspaper Cuttings (Mitchell Library), vol 166, pp 148-54. Also Newspaper Cuttings on Macquarie (Mitchell Library) 1889-1922.
- 5 *The Sun*, 7.1.1914.
- 6 Abbott, JHM, "Macquarie the Man", in *Art in Australia*, 1921, pp 1-19.
- 7 Ellis, MH, *Lachlan Macquarie: His Life, Adventures and Times*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1952.
- 8 Ritchie, J, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography*, MUP, Melbourne, 1986.
- 9 The following account of Macquarie's career draws on the article in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, vol 2, MUP, Melbourne 1967, pp 187-90; Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarie*, p 1ff; Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie*, pp 1-97.
- 10 *ADB*, vol 2, pp 186-7.
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- 13 Macquarie to Duke of York, 25.7.1817, *HRA*, vol IX, p 444.
- 14 Macquarie to Bathurst, 13.5.1817, *HRA*, vol VIII, p 393.
- 15 Macquarie to Bathurst, 18.3.1816, *HRA*, vol VIII, p 65.
- 16 Proclamation, 4.1.1810, *HRA*, vol VII, p 227ff.

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- 19 Macquarie to Castlereagh, 30.4.1810, *HRA*, vol VII, p 250. See also Phillips, M, *A Colonial Autocracy: New South Wales Under Governor Macquarie 1810-1821*, first published 1908, 2nd impression, SUP, Sydney, 1971, pp 88-108.
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- 33 For the general background, see Austin, AG, *Australian Education 1788-1900: Church, State and Public Education in Colonial Australia*, Isaac Pitman, Melbourne, 1961, p 1ff; Cleverley, J, *The First Generation: School and Society in Early Australia*, SUP, Sydney, 1971.
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- 72 Melbourne, Ch VI, pp 47-55.
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