

Honey, Silk and Cider

A Precis by Vivien Moss 2nd July 2022

Henry Frederick Francis Adair Barrington, 1808 - 1882, was the twelfth child of the Fifth Viscount, George Barrington was a lawyer, farmer and politician who decided to settle in the new Colony of South Africa in 1841. He bought Portland, an area of land consisting of 13,700 acres, on which he built a three-roomed wooden house. Portland was 150 miles east of Cape Town and close to the Kynasa river. While beautiful with an abundance of water and good pastureland, surrounded by forests and mountains, it was primitive and without any clearly defined roads. After seven years, during which he failed to start building a more permanent house in stone, Henry returned to England for a family visit. In Bath he met and fell in love with Georgiana Knox, known as the Belle of bath.

After their wedding they sailed to Portland with a huge cargo of furniture, merino sheep, farming implements and wedding presents. He then built his wife a stone kitchen as the prelude to building permanent house of stone to replace the wooden one. However, this house was many years in the making.

The author, Katherine Newdigate, a granddaughter of Henry, quotes from his very detailed Farm Diaries as well as from the copious and long letters written to Lowther, his beloved brother in England. She says "Henry shines forth as a reliable exponent of his time and class." And later in the book "Masculinity rode forth unchallenged. Wives, children and servants obeyed him, albeit surging with proper rebellion."

Henry and Georgiana went on to have seven children. Only the first three were sent to England to be educated. There was no money for the education of the remaining four. Georgina is described as a capable and energetic wife who coped magnificently with Henry's long absences from home when he was needed at Cape Town as Chairman of the Board of Magistrates. These absences were often months long.

Portland House, reminiscent of an English country house, was not fully completed at the time of Henry's death in 1882. Setbacks were many. Not least was the devastating fire in February 1869 that swept through the Kynasa region devouring acres and acres of land including some of the half-finished Portland House, its sawmill and many of the farm buildings. Several silver Barrington heirlooms also perished in the fire.

From the farm diaries we learn about the merino sheep, their lambs, the horses, oxen, ostriches, pigs, cattle, silkworms, bees and later cider. His letters to Lowther always mention his money worries, his problems with his workers and his despair at achieving his objectives. He also demonstrates a deep interest and knowledge of world politics.

The author mentions she has a pair of old-fashioned silver candlesticks and a large silver tankard which was the Admiral's in the Becket plate room. The story of Robin Adair, plus verses of the song, and mention of the painting of the Adair family, attributed to Gainsborough, provide even more interest.