

A SKETCH OF MY FATHER'S LIFE :
ROBERT DAWSON,
OF
BENTLEY LODGE, GREAT BENTLEY,
ESSEX, ENGLAND.

BY A. M. LAMOTTE.

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MY father was born in November, 1782, I believe at Great Bentley, Essex. He was the youngest son of Joseph Dawson; he had one brother and two sisters. My grandfather was also the son of a Joseph Dawson; he had four brothers and, I think, three sisters. His father (my grandfather's father) died without a will; he might have inherited all the property—he did not—he divided it among his brothers and sisters. My grandfather's grandfather was the first Dawson that came to Bentley. He came from Suffolk, and his wife was a Miss Burton, from Cheshire, and I believe the Suffolk Dawsons came originally from Yorkshire. My father had one brother and two sisters. My uncle was the eldest; his name was Joseph; he had bright sparkling black eyes and curly hair and a handsome face, and very stout—the only fat member of the family—he was a dreadful tease. He was married; he had four daughters, Mrs. Samuda was the eldest. The two sons were married and died without children. My father's eldest sister married Mr. John Kiddell, and the De Montmorencies are their grandchildren. My father was of middle height, a handsome man, and strikingly like the Duke of Wellington. We had a good portrait of the Duke; the likeness is very apparent. His friends, when they met him in London after an absence of some months, would say: "Why, you grow more like the Duke every time I see you." Soldiers used to salute him sometimes.

My father was married about 1810 or 1811. My mother's name was Taylor. You have an account of her family. They lived at Bentley Lodge, Great Bentley, until the year 1821, when he left Essex and went to Berkshire to manage Lord Barrington's Estate. Becket was the name of the place, and Shrivenham the name of the village. We lived in the old mansion, in which there were rooms sixteen feet high and large in proportion. There were beautiful shrubberies, a long water walk, two islands in the broad part of the water, and beautiful swans that used to follow us when we were in the boat, and sometimes they would have a brood of cygnets following them. Faringdon was our post town, and a boy on a donkey used to come every morning with the post bag, which was locked, and return with it in the afternoon. It was about four miles to Faringdon. From the lawn there was a lovely view of the White Horse. Oh! it was a charming place.

On the White Horse hills there was a Roman and a Danish encampment, and also not far from them was Wayland Smith's Cave; you will read about that in Kenilworth. In the summer holidays we used to have delightful picnics at these places. When peace was declared it ruined the farmers, so my father had to give up farming like many others, and left Essex and came to lovely Becket. He remained at Becket until 1825, when he left to go to Australia, as he was appointed chief agent to the Australian Agricultural Company. He sailed on

June 24th, 1825, in the *York*, having under his charge 40 individuals (men, women and children), whom he had selected for various duties ; also three hundred and twenty three sheep, nine head of horned cattle, and a choice collection of British and other plants selected for cultivation. My cousin, John Dawson, was appointed my father's assistant. He sailed in the *Brothers*, and had also forty individuals in his charge, between three and four hundred sheep, three head of horned cattle and seven horses. They reached Sydney on the 24th November, 1825, after a favourable voyage of twenty-three weeks. John Dawson was a young man for such a charge ; he was only eighteen, but he was clever and reliable. Fourteen days spent at Rio were included in the twenty-three weeks. The losses in both ships during the voyage amounted to no more than eighteen sheep, and the remainder were landed in better condition than when they were put on board at Cowes.

My father was the first chief agent for the Company. He would have now been called manager, I suppose. He was badly treated by this Company, who listened to evil reports made by members of a Committee who were not upright. It caused my father's return to England, where he hoped to obtain redress, but failed in so doing. This embittered the remainder of his life, for he could not recover from the injustice of the proceedings. He was succeeded in the management by Sir Edward Parry, the Arctic explorer. Unfortunately, when my father came out

here he had no agreement with the Company, so his services could be dispensed with at any moment. He consulted his friends about it. They told him they were sure he did not need one, he had to deal with an honorable set of men, some of them Members of Parliament; but this was bad advice, as it proved to be. My father had an interview with Sir Edward told him his experience, and recommended him to have an agreement. He said he certainly should. He engaged for five years, and, I believe, a pension. I believe I am quite correct in stating this, so he was safe: If you read his book again, I think you will see what an amount of business he had to transact.

After returning to England he obtained the management of Lord Dartmouth's Estates, in Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire, and also some London property. He remained there for about seven years, and then came out to this country again. He brought stock out with him, but it was not a successful venture, many of them died. My mother died in 1835, and before my father left England he married again. He sailed from England on September 22nd, 1838, and landed here on January 25th, 1839. This marriage was not a very happy one. When he was about 80 years of age—in 1862 I think—he returned to England, where he remained till he died in 1866, and where he ended his chequered life in comfort.

His early days were passed in stirring times. Within a few miles of Bentley, Wheeley Barracks were erected for

10,000 men; this was at the time when Napoleon's invasion was expected. My father was Captain of a Militia Corps, and the village tailor was the Lieutenant, and a very good one too. I have heard my father say on one occasion, when his regiment was reviewed he was complimented by the Commander-in-Chief for the efficiency of his Corps. Two of his best friends were officers in the army, and both were at the battle of Waterloo—Dr. Beattie and Captain Christie, both Scotchmen. When he went to live at Becket, in Berkshire, these two friends took a cottage in the village and lived there too as long as he was there. He had so many amusing anecdotes about his younger days, and the people of all ranks that he had known, and the habits of the times. He was an abstemious man. When he was young it was the custom at dinner parties for every one to become intoxicated and to find themselves under the table. He was dining on one occasion among many others, he had on Wellington boots, I expect they were the very high ones that came over the knees. However, he determined not to take more wine, so he quietly poured it into his boots. This happened once or twice; at last some one noticed it, and drew attention to it, and he was told it was against the rules, that he must drink or leave the room. He got up and said he would leave, he could not drink to make a . . . of himself. They would not let him leave and said he should do as he liked always.

My father was a man of ability and of general information. His favourite study was geology, and through this taste he was the means of enriching the Earl of Dartmouth to a very great extent. The Earl had large coal mines on his estate, and my father became persuaded that there were still greater riches for him under the earth if he would seek for them under the new red sandstone. Coal had never been found there. Why? Because the new red sandstone in a convulsion of nature had been thrown upon the old red sandstone, under which was the coal. From what he observed, my father felt sure that coal was under this formation and other slighter formations which lay upon the old red sandstone, under which was the coal. The sinking, of course, would be much deeper, because you must first get through the new red sandstone. After some difficulty and much persuasion, my father induced the Earl to sink a shaft. The sinking went on well and quietly, but at last the geologists—among them Sir Roger Murchison—heard of this new idea, and came to Sandwell, Lord Dartmouth's residence near Birmingham, and upon which property his then coal mines were. They inspected the works being carried on, and discouraged the whole business, and expressed their disbelief about finding of coal under that formation. My father, of course, saw them, and conversed with them, and kept his own opinion. This was an unpleasant audience for him to be confronted in opposition with this great geologist, and feeling that Lord Dartmouth's

confidence would be shaken. If so, he did not show it; he behaved manfully. Fortunately he was a rich man and could stand the expense. Much to my father's gratification, he avowed his intention of continuing the sinking to the necessary point. At last coal was found, and good coal. I believe the sinking was the deepest in England at the time—900 feet. I think my father had plans made of the pits, and presented a set to the Sydney Museum. I have seen them there, but the last time I was there they were not to be seen; they had been removed. This was many years ago. While the shafts were being sunk you may imagine how intense his anxiety and interest must have been, and when the first piece of coal was presented to him what a relief it must have been to see the fulfilment of his conviction. He never boasted about this successful termination of his firm opinion. Many a man would have done so, but he was a modest man, and a kind hearted man, always ready to help when help was wanted, and that it was in his power to render it.

Lord Dartmouth was not a liberal though a good man. Through these new coal mines his riches were wonderfully increased, and it was not unbecoming under these circumstances to suppose that he would have made the originator of this wealth a handsome present. He did not do so, but some years afterwards a sum of £300 was sent out to him in recognition of his work in that direction. With that sum he bought Redhead, near Newcastle, and could he have kept it, it would have been a valuable

property. He was very musical. He sang well and had a good voice ; he played the violin and the flute well. When he was young he told his father that he wished very much to learn the violin. He said no, he would have no such noise about the house. However, he was bent upon learning, so he went to Colchester, some miles off, to take lessons, and when his father found he could really play, he was delighted.

His first family consisted of four children that lived beyond infancy, two sons and two daughters. His eldest daughter died in 1827 ; she was fourteen years of age. The letters that gave him this sad intelligence reached him just when he had received the cruel blow from the A.A. Company. He grieved painfully over this great loss. My cousin, John Dawson, found him frequently in tears with her likeness beside him. He thought it better to take it from him, which he did and brought it to England.

My father left Australia early in 1828, I think. He had a long passage. He touched at Moreton Bay, as it was called then, and collected a few native curiosities. They went through Torres Straits ; the captain anchored every night, it was not deemed safe to navigate during the night. He went to the Isle of France, where he remained three weeks waiting for a ship bound to England. After reaching England he wrote his book on Australia. He tried to obtain redress from members and influential persons belonging to the A.A. Company, but it was not to

be had. The Company wanted to prevent his acquiring a grant of land which he had applied for before leaving Australia. About that time, just after his application was sent in, the Government ceased giving grants. My father took his grievance to the House of Commons and obtained the grant, afterwards called Goorangoola. In 1830, through Lord Barrington's influence, he obtained the management of Lord Dartmouth's Estates (who was his brother-in-law), where he remained until 1838, I think, and returned to Australia, which he had always wished to do; he liked the sun. He sailed on September 22nd, 1838, in the *Hashemy*. He had with him his second wife and child, and his daughter, and two or three relations, and some stock, sheep and horses. He was not, however, successful with them as he was on the former occasion, nor did his affairs prosper, and disappointment and loss prevailed.

After some years of trial he determined to return to England. Before doing so he sold Redhead, and invested the proceeds so well that it enabled him to live comfortably in England for the remainder of his life. He left Australia in 1861. He was eighty years of age. In one of his letters he told me that he and Sir Alfred Stephen, who was on board, used to play together on deck, Sir Alfred the flute and my father the violin. He lived at or near Greenwich, near some nephews and nieces and an aged sister who lived to be over ninety. He was not quite eighty-four when he died in November, 1866. He was not ill long,

and did not suffer much. It was an immense relief to me to know that his latter days were passed in comfort, free from care, able to amuse himself with his books, and have some one to read to him when he wished. It was a calm peaceful ending to one who had gone through much trouble, but with untiring energy strove to make things better. He was buried at Greenwich. Members of his family were for several generations buried in the Chancel of Great Bentley Church.

I have a circumstance to relate which occurred to my father in his younger days, and which was of deep concern to him. We read of such events, or something like them in novels. It is to be hoped that this evil spirit seldom disturbs the tenor of daily life. My father in early life was engaged to a young lady. Everything went on happily for a time and with the approval of friends on both sides, when one day when paying a visit at the lady's house, she went with him to the greenhouse and told him with tears that she must break off the engagement. He asked why. She said she could not tell him. He said he must know, but she only said it was impossible, she could not. She gave him his likeness and letter, and clung to him weeping sadly. They parted and did not meet again. More than twenty years afterwards one of my aunts was at Bentley, and she was told by a friend that this young lady had married, and that a short time ago she was on her death-bed, and told this friend why she had been obliged to break off her engagement with Mr. Dawson. Her sister

was in love with him, and declared that unless she broke off the engagement she would kill her! I had a song bound up with other music which has written on it, "With Miss So-and-So's kind regards." I have not mentioned names. It is better not; there may be members of the family still living. I feel sure there are.

My father was a sportsman. He rode well and was a good shot, and would follow the hounds when he had a chance. On one occasion his horse was staked; he changed horses with my brother, who took it home; he was only a boy. Later on, when he had reached home, he was very angry to find that the village blacksmith had been doctoring the poor horse, in his antiquated fashion, by stuffing rag into the wound, and thus increasing the poor thing's sufferings.

I forgot to mention that when my father left Essex and went to Berkshire to take the management of Lord Barrington's Estate, he entered into a speculation, I suppose it might be called, in old South Wales. He rented land from the Government in Glamorganshire, and I think in Brecknockshire. I was very young then, between five and seven, and of course did not know much about it. I know he had sheep in numbers, in fact, he was a squatter! The sheep used to be sent to market, and the ponies too. His brother had the management of the concern. He had a nice stone house with good sized rooms to live in. I stayed there for five or six months on one occasion. It was called Abercrave. Part of the run

was mountainous and rough. There was a sheep station called Cnwr (Canure was the pronunciation), it did not answer. Of course, when my father left for Australia the concern was given up, and my uncle succeeded him in the management of Becket.

I think that I have written all that I can remember of the long life of one who did not live in vain. Writing this history has given me much pleasure, and I hope the perusal of it will afford some interest to his grand-children and great-grand-children.

A. MARIA LAMOTTE.

17th February, 1904.

There is another circumstance which I think I may mention, as it is a somewhat historical fact. My father named many places around Port Stephens when he was in authority there. I cannot remember more than two or three, but should I be able to call them to remembrance, they may be added to the list I now give.

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