

TWO PIONEER FAMILIES: THE EDMONSTONES AND OVERELLS

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(Read to a meeting of the Society, 24 May 1973)

This is the history of two pioneer families, the Edmonstones and Overells, who migrated to the Colony of New South Wales early in the nineteenth century.

The first arrival was William James Overell, together with his wife, nee Alice Morden Nightingale. They were married on 16 January 1816 at St. Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, London. It has always been believed by the family that Alice's sister was the grandmother of Florence Nightingale.

The records of marriage at St. Leonard's Church are very sketchy and do not show the place of birth or the town or village in which she lived. It is logical to assume that the couple had eloped and did not want their marriage traced. They had decided to migrate to the Colony of New South Wales and with this in view, made application to the Colonial Office for permission.

Permission was not granted until 1819 and by this time William and Alice were the parents of a son, named William after his father.

The following letter was written from Downing Street on 8 April 1819. Copies of this letter are still held by the family and it reads:

"Governor Macquarie,

Sir,

I am desired by Lord Bathurst to acquaint you that he has given permission to the bearer, Mr. William James Overell, together with his wife and one child, to proceed as a free settler to the Colony of New South Wales, and I am to desire that you will make to him upon his arrival a grant of land in proportion to his means of bringing the land into cultivation.

I am Sir

Your most obedient and humble servant,
(signed) Henry Goulburn."

It is known that William and Alice arrived in Hobart Town very early in 1820 and an area of some 400 acres of land was granted to them at a little hamlet called "Glenorchy", just outside Hobart, where they had decided to settle.

It would be difficult to know whether William had trouble in obtaining passage or whether it was a long and tedious voyage from London to the Colony. During the voyage, a second son, John, was born, and it is John who comes directly into this history. He was the father of the second William James, who came to Queensland in 1883.

We will now return to the first William James and Alice Overell who, after disembarking from the sailing ship *Jesse*, built their own farmhouse and outhouses. The cottage must have been soundly built, as it was not demolished until 1968, some 140 years later.

It is hard for us to realise the primitive conditions under which these early settlers lived. They and ticket-of-leave convicts brought up their families under very hard and difficult conditions. Only the fortunate received any education and it was mostly the responsibility of the parents.

The population of Tasmania was made up of Aborigines, soldiers, free settlers, ticket-of-leave convicts and convicts, some of whom were the very dregs from the bottom of the barrel. Settlers in the outlying areas were still liable to attack from Aborigines and bushrangers, which fortunately did not happen very often.

Planting, sowing, picking and harvesting seems to have been a community affair with each neighbour helping the other. Churches played a big part in the early everyday life of the community, and although the people worked six days a week from sun-up to sun-down, Sunday was always a day of rest when they could attend a church service and after the service, discuss the problems of the previous week.

ORIGIN OF "POMIE"?

It is also interesting to note that the papers accompanying each convict sent to the colonies had the letters "P.O.M.E." stamped on the back. These were the four first letters of the words "Prisoner of Mother England". Many people believe that the word "Pomie" was derived from this source.

William's farm and orchard were a success and he became interested in the activities of the community, and in his later years built a home in Hobart.

William died in 1866, and Alice one year later in 1867. The home was then occupied by various members of the family for many years, and it was here that his two great grand-daughters decided to open a finishing school for girls some time after the First World War.

William and Alice left a family of six children, three boys and three girls. The second son, John, married Abigail Mannington. John and Abigail were the parents of eight children,

three boys and five girls. The second son, William James, named after his grandfather, had the same spirit of adventure as his forebears and came to Queensland with most of his brothers and sisters.

They arrived in Brisbane in 1883, and William James decided to become a merchant. He opened a store in Fortitude Valley on the corner of Warner and Ann Streets, and a few years later married Amelia Cooling. They were the parents of seven children, five boys and two girls. William James, who was a born merchant, did not take long to make his presence felt in Brisbane.

After consolidating his position he decided to open branches in the near country areas and opened a store at Charleville and another at Laidley.

DOGGED BY DISASTER

In 1891, W.J. decided to open a branch store in Queen Street, Brisbane, and in 1893, during the disastrous flood, saw his entire stock ruined by eleven feet of water in the Queen Street store. The loss amounted to many thousands of pounds.

Early in the nineteen hundreds, W.J. decided to move his Valley premises to the corner of Brunswick and Wickham Streets, and opened Brisbane's largest retail emporium on the site. Unfortunately, W.J. was dogged by bad luck again when three years later a disastrous fire razed the building to the ground and the entire stock was again lost.

The following article taken from the "Jubilee History of Queensland" (pp. 305 and 306) will give some idea of the courage and fortitude of this man:—

"W. J. Overell and Sons Ltd. Universal Providers, Brunswick Street and at Charleville, Laidley and Pittsworth.

"Evidently the word failure is not to be found in Messrs. Overell's and Sons dictionary. This well-known firm, which has been in the drapery trade in Brisbane for over a quarter of a century, has twice had reverses serious enough to have caused most business houses to put up their shutters. It commenced operations in the Valley in 1883, and in the early 90's opened a branch shop in Queen Street. In the big 1893 flood the water rose to a height of 11ft in the firm's Queen Street premises. The entire stock was destroyed, the loss amounting to thousands of pounds. They were just making headway against circumstances and were on the high road to prosperity once more when in 1904 a disastrous fire broke out at the Valley establishment, destroying the same building which had just been erected at great expense, their stock being made a mass of ruins within an hour. The two

losses cost them something like twenty-five thousand pounds. The business rose triumphant like a Phoenix from the ashes and they even made capital out of their misfortune by coining the Phoenix trademark.

"Branches have already been established at the outlying centres of Laidley, Charleville and Pittsworth.

"Two of Mr. Overell's sons are also directors of the company and control their own departments.

"Mr. W. J. Overell, managing director, has just returned from a visit to all trade and manufacturing centres in Great Britain, as well as the Continent and the United States. He also visited Hong Kong and Japan and crossed Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and from his observations in these countries there is a likelihood of further expansion in the near future."

BUSINESS BY CATALOGUE

In 1905, when the old building was re-built, Overells was possibly the first retail business to be lighted by electricity. This was generated on the premises and the power also worked two passenger lifts and one goods lift. During his overseas trip, W.J. realised the benefits that would derive from a mail-order business, and within 10 years catalogues were sent to people of Queensland and the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.

Two main catalogues were issued yearly, a Spring and Autumn, but in addition to these, a Christmas catalogue was produced, also bulletins for the Spring and Winter sales. Between thirty and forty thousand of these catalogues were issued for each season and a similar number of bulletins. In addition to these bulletins, the firm also employed a staff of travellers to call on the residents of every farm or homestead in the southern part of Queensland. Each traveller had an area which took him approximately three months to cover.

On their first trip they collected the orders and forwarded them to the store: the customers usually received the goods within seven to 14 days. On the second visit they usually collected payment as well as further orders, and it would seem that these were the first of the budget accounts.

Of course, the tempo of life in those days was totally different from that of today, and there was more of a business and customer relationship.

W.J. was very interested in the affairs of the community and served on many committees. He was also a foundation member of the Booroodabin Bowling Club, which is reputed to be the first established in Queensland. He was also very interested in motoring and drove a white T. Model Ford

roadster. W.J. must have had nostalgia about his home in Tasmania, as he named all his homes in Brisbane, of which there were quite a few, "Glenorchy".

At one stage there were two "Glenorchys" in Crescent Road. The Overell Estate ran from Crescent Road along Kingsford Smith Drive to Gray's Road and as far up the hilly slope as Langside Road. The first fifty yards was perfectly flat, but from then on a U-shaped gully from Crescent to Gray's Road extended to the top of the property.

The carriageway from Kingsford Smith Drive formed a wide circle in front of the large stairs from the lower ground floor, and the house made a very pretty picture nestling into the hill. Behind the main home of W.J., a carriageway had been cut to give access to the homes of the various members of the family. Adjacent to the circular driveway were to be found a lawn tennis court and a three-rink bowling green.

W.J.'s eldest son, Arthur Bertram, built his home next door and married May Gooding. They were the parents of six children, four boys and two girls, and it is worth recording that the deed of this property is one of the few in Brisbane that has an easement for light and view, which means that no multi-storey building can be built in front of this particular property.

Arthur Bertram's launch, the *Warrior*, was moored directly in front of the main home.

William Hobart built his home at the very top of the estate and later sold the property to Sir James Blair, Chief Justice of Queensland. He died at his home in London Road in 1925 at the age of 41.

The land covered an area of possibly two acres, and although it was subdivided in the late 1920's, the gates and gateposts and the carriageway are still standing.

This estate was nearly self-supporting and had its own orchard, vegetable garden, fowls, two pigs which lived in a cement sty with a little house at one end, and a big red cow which produced sixteen quarts of milk a day. The recorder will never forget this cow, as it was his duty to milk it during the yard-man's day off.

LINK WITH EDMONSTONES

It was William Hobart who comes directly into this history, as he married Marie Georgina Markwell in Sydney in 1905. Marie Georgina Markwell was the great-grand daughter of George Edmonstone.

William James Overell died in 1917, and his wife Amelia in 1921. Clive Cooling Overell and Claude Mannington

Overell sold their sheep properties in the west after their mother's death and joined the firm.

Clive had married Alice Logan and Claude had married Amy Ward. Clive and Alice had three children, two sons and a daughter, whilst Claude and Amy had two sons. Arthur Bertram and William Hobart became joint managing directors in 1917.

Bad luck dogged the Overell family again when, in 1925, William Hobart died from a kidney complaint at the age of 41, and Arthur Bertram died in 1930 at the age of 49. This meant that the two managing directors had died within four years.

Clive and Claude then became managing directors, and a fifth son, John Clarence, was also a member of the company. The history of the family would fill a volume, as at this stage we have only gone as far as the third generation born in Australia, and in 1972 there were seven generations of the Overell-Edmonstone families actually born in Australia.

Of the two girls, Cherie married Dr. H. Rouse-Bastard and they were the parents of two girls and one son. The family lived in various parts of England where he practised medicine. The second daughter, Myrtle, married Howard Spensley and they were the parents of three daughters.

ANOTHER GREAT ADVENTURE

George Edmonstone was born at the family home in William Street, Edinburgh in the year 1810, and died at his home "Pahroombin" on the southern side of Breakfast Creek, on 24 February 1883 at the age of 73.

He was the only son of William Edmonstone, a commissary officer in the Royal Navy, and his wife Alexandrina, nee Farquerhson. Both George's parents died before he was 13, and from that time until he was 21 he lived with relatives. Whether he had any trade or profession is not known, and he apparently did not apply for permission to migrate to New South Wales until 1831.

Permission was granted by the Colonial Office in 1832, and early in that year he set out on his great adventure to the Colony of New South Wales on the good ship *Numa*, which arrived at Sydney during the same year.

He had sufficient funds to become a storekeeper, and purchased a cottage on the Harbour front. He was apparently a successful merchant and in 1835 married Alexandrina Watson Tillery. Their elder daughter Georgina was born in 1837, and some six months later they decided to sell all their properties in Sydney and move to Maitland, where George opened another business and in the following two



GEORGE EDMONSTONE

He arrived in 1840—one of the first free settlers of Moreton Bay.

years became quite a successful storekeeper. In 1839 a second daughter was born to the couple and she was christened Elizabeth.

At this stage, George purchased a cattle station named “Normanby Plains” and appointed a manager to look after his affairs in Maitland. The family moved to the cattle station. Shortly after his arrival in the area the Aborigines became very troublesome and attacked the “Normanby

Plains" homestead. The wife of a Scot employed by George Edmonstone was wounded by a spear, and although not badly hurt, Alexandrina, fearing for the lives of her two infant children, asked George to sell his holdings and return to Sydney. George agreed and Alexandrina and the two children returned to Sydney. It was during this period that George met John Williams, owner and master of the schooner *Edward*. John Williams had just returned from a voyage to Moreton Bay and he was very impressed with the land and future potential of the area.

He apparently painted a very glowing picture and George, when he returned to Sydney, discussed the matter with Alexandrina and decided to join John Williams and the other families who were returning to the settlement of Brisbane.

The History of Queensland compiled in 1929, volume 2, page 1 quotes:

"First free settlers to take up abode in embryo town of Brisbane. The first of those who arrived in 1840 were John Williams, Thomas Dowse, George Edmonstone, G. S. Le Breton, David Bowe, John Richardson, W. Holman Berry, R. Little, E. Phelan, and M. Moriarty."

Any of the above could have been the first free settler, but this honour should go to John Williams who had visited the colony during the previous year.

BRISBANE'S FIRST BUTCHER

How these settlers obtained permission to settle in 1840 is unknown, as Brisbane was not open to free settlers until 1844. George became Brisbane's first butcher, and whilst awaiting the completion of his shop and cottage he and his family lived with his cousin, Andrew Petrie, at his home at Petrie's Bight. Andrew was the Government Engineer who, with his family, played a major part in the early days of settlement; his son John was the first Mayor of Brisbane, 1859-61.

On a map drawn by C. F. Gurler in 1844 the location of George's cottage and butcher shop appears to be somewhere between the Regent and Wintergarden Theatres and extends right through to Elizabeth Street.

George's cattle paddock appears to run along the western side of Adelaide Street from a point somewhere near Wharf Street to Albert Street, and takes in the area of Wickham Terrace.

During the 1840's George purchased approximately 70 acres of land at Newstead, and on this property built an eight-roomed cottage which he named "Pahroombin". Some ten years later, the cottage was demolished and a large home

built in its place. George's neighbour on his western boundary was Patrick Mayne, and the boundary on the eastern side was the land on which Patrick Leslie built the house now known as Newstead House, the headquarters of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

George was also the owner of 400 acres of land at Newmarket. The official records of the land-holders on the eastern side of Queen Street in 1848 do not show George Edmonstone as the owner of a butcher shop, and the only butcher mentioned was Patrick Mayne.

Apparently George Edmonstone sold his property before this date. It is not known whether George ever owned land described as Edmonstone's paddock, and it is possible that he only had grazing rights over this area. However, at a later date he did own properties in Wickham Terrace. George also held property at South Brisbane.

George and Alexandrina did not have sons to carry on the family name, which ceased to exist at the death of Alexandrina.

A History of Local Government, Brisbane 1859-1909, by Gordon Greenwood and John Laverty, records as follows:

“Page 31 — George Edmonstone a pioneer shop-keeper.

Page 70 — Edmonstone was first a member of the Assembly and later a member of the Legislative Council, to which he was called in 1876.”

(There is a small discrepancy here, as George was not called to the Legislative Council until 12 May 1877.)

“Page 72 — Edmonstone's association with Brisbane went back to the early days of free settlement. He migrated to Sydney in New South Wales in 1832 and was in business in Sydney and Maitland before acquiring his Normanby Plains station about 1840. Shortly afterwards he sold his property and moved to Brisbane, where he built up a highly successful business in Queen Street. Though no great speaker, he played a very active part in municipal affairs until 1866, being closely associated with the Brisbane Bridge and the Town Hall. He later became a member of Parliament and remained in the Legislative Council until his death. (See *Brisbane Courier* 24.2.1883).”

There seems to be some confusion in the last sentence of page 72.

George was the member for West Moreton in the first Parliament, in addition to being a member of the first Council under John Petrie. George signed the first Parliamentary Roll on 22 May 1860.

After Queensland's separation from New South Wales in

1859, Sir George Ferguson Bowen became Governor of Queensland and remained in office until 1868, and it was his proud boast that when he took over the Governorship there was fivepence ha'penny in the treasury.

HELPED SCOTS SETTLERS

In 1847 George Edmonstone retired from active business and became an investor. He sponsored and aided many Scottish families to migrate to Queensland as free settlers. It must be remembered that Parliamentarians and members of the Council were elected by the citizens and gave their time and energy in a purely voluntary capacity. These dedicated men received no payment whatsoever. The first members who received payment were those who were elected late in the 1880's.

Very little capital work could be done during the first three years of the Brisbane Council, 1859-1862, as there was little finance available to the Council, and a certified balance sheet by the auditors, Messrs. F. S. Ebbsworth and Richard F. Phelan, and signed by the Mayor, John Petrie on 9 January 1860, will give some idea of the precarious position of the finance of the Brisbane Council.

This balance sheet reads as follows:

On the debtor's side —	
September 21 1859 —	
To amount received from Government Reservoir	£100. 0.0
December 31 —	
To amount overdraft on account drainage	1.11.0
To amount of balance due A.J. Stock Bank	138.16.8
	<hr/>
TOTAL	240. 7.8
On the credit side —	
By amount expended for salaries	47.12.4
By amount expended on public works	157. 2.6
By amount expended on Corporation Seal	35. 0.0
By amount of bank interest on overdraft	12.10
	<hr/>
TOTAL	240. 7.8

In 1863, when George became Mayor, finance was more readily available. At this stage North and South Brisbane were linked by a ferry, and George realised that to make the city grow, it would be necessary to link the two areas by a bridge. Plans for the bridge were put on the drawing board in 1863, but the bridge was not completed until 1874. The Council also decided to build a Town Hall, and in the same

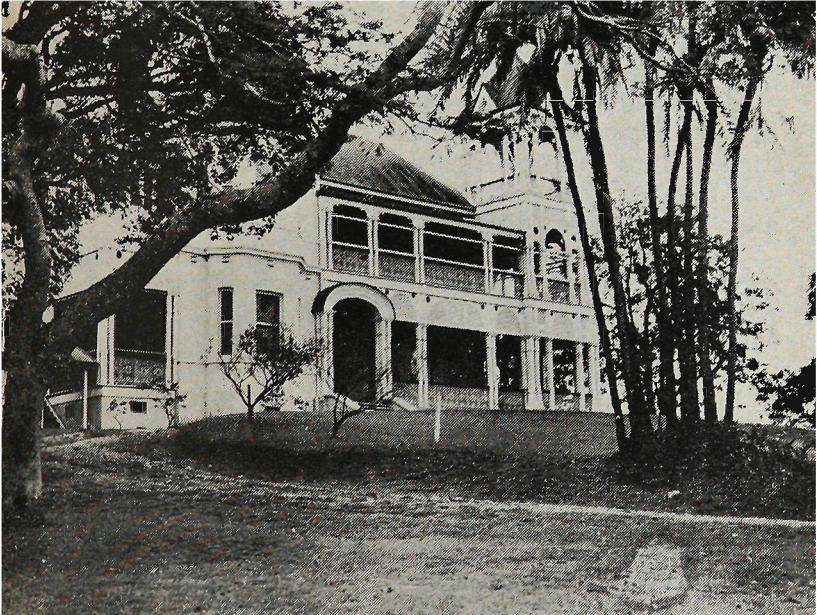
year, 1863, plans were drawn and a contract let for a building costing twenty-five thousand pounds. The foundation stone was laid by the Governor, Sir George Bowen, on 28 January 1864.

George resigned from the Council in 1866, and from then until his death in 1883 continued his parliamentary career as a member of the Assembly and later of the Legislative Council.

I have dealt with George as a pioneer, storekeeper, investor, Councillor and Member of Parliament, not George the father. He was devoted to his wife and children, and between 1847 and 1853 he lived at Wickham Terrace. George was a keen horseman and is reputed to have had one of the first racehorses in Brisbane, named Zoe.

His two daughters, Georgina and Elizabeth, were also very keen horsewomen and on week-ends and after school lessons could be seen riding their white ponies on the bridle path between Petrie's Bight and New Farm.

George's life must have been very full. His first sight of Sydney Heads always remained in his memory. Also his arrival with his family in Brisbane in 1840, and a reunion with Andrew Petrie, and the arrival of the sailing ship



"Moorlands" as it stands in 1973.

Chaseley in 1849 carrying John Markwell, his wife and one daughter.

BUILDER OF "MOORLANDS"

John was born at Horncastle, Lincolnshire, England in 1824, and married Emily Izzard in 1842. Emily died in 1850, and two years later he married George Edmonstone's elder daughter, Georgina.

George had given John and Georgina 18-odd acres of land on Coronation Drive, where John built the home known as "Moorland Villa" for his bride. This historic home is now known as "Moorlands".

John and Georgina had 10 children, of whom eight survived. It is the second son, William Allison Markwell, who comes directly into this history, as he married Mary Alexandrina Allison, the younger daughter of Elizabeth Allison, who was George Edmonstone's younger daughter.

Elizabeth married Captain John Allison, master of the ship *Gazehound*, one of the first ships to take a cargo of wool from Brisbane to the United Kingdom. On her marriage certificate Elizabeth's address is shown as on board the *Gazehound* in Breakfast Creek. Their honeymoon trip was a visit to the United Kingdom and Europe.

Georgina had married John Markwell at the age of sixteen-and-a-half years, and died at her home, "Moorland Villa", on 4 October 1870 at the age of 33 after an illness lasting four months. Just prior to Georgina's death, George Edmonstone transferred to her husband, John Markwell, land and building on the south-western corner of Queen and Edward Streets. A few years later John Markwell married for the third time, and his wife was Harriet Hunt Davis. It was Harriet who sold "Moorlands" to Dr. Mayne's mother after the death of John Markwell.

We will now return to George Edmonstone and his younger daughter Elizabeth. George had purchased two blocks of land in Elizabeth Street, on which he built the Theatre Royal.

To give some idea of the value of real estate in the heart of the City of Brisbane in the 1850's, for one block George paid twenty-eight pounds ten, and for the other, fifty pounds and eight shillings. George transferred this property to Elizabeth, who later sold it round about 1900.

Of George's many public experiences, possibly the one he remembered most of all during his term as Mayor, was the presentation of James Murrells to the Governor, Sir George Bowen. Murrells had been shipwrecked and spent 17 years in exile with the wild blacks of North Queensland. When he

returned to civilization after his rescue he could not even remember his own name and called himself Jemmie Morrell, spelt Morrill. It was later proved that his name was James Murrells, spelt Murrells.

A very interesting booklet was written by Edmund Gregory and covers James Murrells' life and shipwreck and terrible adventures among savage tribes, their manners, customs, languages and superstitions, and also his rescue and return to civilization. This booklet was printed by Edmund Gregory, Brisbane, in 1896.

Possibly the proudest moment of George's political career occurred in 1881 when he and his wife were presented to Princes Edward and George during their visit to Brisbane. George's younger daughter Elizabeth died in 1925 at the age of 85, and it was also her grand-daughter, Marie Georgina Markwell, who married William Hobart Overell in Sydney in 1905.

George firmly believed in social security and in 1863, with others, founded the Queensland Insurance Company of which he was director. Although the company lasted only a few years, it was certainly the first insurance company in Queensland.

The Honourable George Edmonstone and Alexandrina are buried in the family grave at Toowong Cemetery.