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Wentworth, D'Arcy (1762–1827)

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D'Arcy Wentworth (1762?-1827), medical practitioner and public servant, was born near Portadown, Ireland, the sixth of the eight children of D'Arcy Wentworth and his wife, Martha Dickson, also of County Armagh. The first of the Irish Wentworths to come to Australia could trace his ancestry through twenty generations from Robert of Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire in the thirteenth century. His descendant, D'Arcy Wentworth, went to Ireland as agent in Athlone to Wentworth Dillon, fourth earl of Roscommon, during the reign of Charles II, served in 1689 in the army of William III and established himself as a landowner at Fyanstown Castle in County Meath. Some Irish Wentworths intermarried into the leading Anglo-Irish families, but Robert, the third of the Irish Wentworths of Fyanstown Castle, was an impecunious barrister with political ambitions which he failed to realize even though a distant kinsman of the marquis of Rockingham, and under him the family resources were completely dissipated. His son D'Arcy, the father of the subject of this sketch, was an innkeeper at Portadown; but however far the Irish Wentworths had financially fallen from their high estate, they still claimed relationship with Rockingham, Lord Fitzwilliam and the earl of Strafford. By 1822 William Wentworth, the elder brother of D'Arcy of Parramatta, was probably the senior representative of the male line of the family which had established itself at Wentworth Woodhouse, though he had no hereditary claim to the earldom of Strafford. The continuing friendship shown to the Irish branch of the family by the inheritors of the Yorkshire estate through the female line was entirely due to this acknowledgment of an ancient descent and the recognition of the natural claims of the heirs in name if not in possession. The financially hard-hit Wentworths naturally laid greater stress on this relationship than did the inheritors of Wentworth Woodhouse, the politically important Rockingham and Fitzwilliam, but it is clear from the correspondence of D'Arcy Wentworth and his brother William and from the Fitzwilliam papers that their distinguished relatives accepted a clear and defined responsibility to their kinsfolk, and D'Arcy Wentworth could always rely on the influence with the government and the occasional financial assistance of Fitzwilliam throughout his entire life.

Before embarking on a medical career D'Arcy Wentworth served as an ensign in the First Armagh Company of the Irish Volunteers under Lord Charlemont. The company was trained by the officers of the 36th Regiment then stationed at Armagh, and during and after the war of American independence, threats of French intervention and social and political changes imbued D'Arcy with popular and liberal views towards society and government which remained with him throughout his Australian career. The influence of the Irish volunteers upon contemporary society was very considerable: not merely did they aid the civil power in the execution of the laws but they set an example of equality when tradesmen and merchants, lawyers and physicians, esquires, baronets and noblemen all intermingled.

D'Arcy Wentworth is uniformly described as 'a handsome, tall man with blue eyes who was invariably popular with all classes and both sexes'. While in the volunteers, Wentworth, as was then customary, was also serving his apprenticeship for the medical profession with Dr Alexander Patton of Tanderagee, himself a volunteer officer; on promise of an appointment in the service of the East India Co. he went to London to obtain further evidence of medical proficiency from the hospitals there. He was introduced to the society of the ruling classes by his kinsman Fitzwilliam, and it is claimed, though no valid proofs remain, that he found himself in financial difficulties through living cheerfully beyond his means. At the Old Bailey sessions beginning on 12 December 1787 he was thrice charged with highway robbery: twice he was found not guilty and in the third acquitted for lack of evidence. He again appeared and was again found not guilty at the sessions beginning on 9 December 1789. At the conclusion of the case the prosecutor informed the judge: 'My Lord, Mr. Wentworth, the prisoner at the Bar, has taken a passage to go in a fleet to Botany Bay and has obtained an appointment in it as Assistant Surgeon and desires to be discharged immediately'.

Wentworth arrived at Port Jackson in the transport *Neptune* on 28 June 1790. On 1 August he sailed in the *Surprise* for Norfolk Island where he began his Australian career as an assistant in the hospital. He was appointed superintendent of convicts at Norfolk Island from 10 September 1791. He returned to Sydney in February 1796 and was appointed one of the assistant surgeons of the colony from 7 April. Thereafter Wentworth served in different grades and with differing responsibilities at the three medical centres at Norfolk Island, Sydney and Parramatta, until his appointment as principal surgeon of the Civil Medical Department, first made in February 1809, was approved in July 1811.

Wentworth had relinquished his convict superintendency when leaving Norfolk Island, but during his active career he held many non-medical posts. Appointed a justice of the peace in May 1810, he was selected to sit in the Governor's Court. In December he was put in charge of Governor **Lachlan Macquarie's** newly reformed police force, which he was to control very ably for nearly a decade. In this position he became the chief police magistrate in Sydney, and his daily work on its bench was a heavy burden which he willingly and efficiently carried. In 1810 he was appointed with **Simeon Lord** and **Andrew Thompson** one of the first commissioners for the turnpike road to Parramatta when **Samuel Marsden** refused to associate with these emancipist colleagues. Macquarie's high respect for Wentworth's probity was shown by his appointing him treasurer of the Police Fund, which was devoted to defraying the expenditure on those public works, gaols, police salaries, and grants which were not financed by the British government. Every three months three-quarters (seven-eighths after 1818) of the colonial revenue, received chiefly from import duties and port dues, were paid into the Police Fund, the balance going to the orphan fund. Wentworth, as treasurer of the former, saw more than £10,000 a year pass through his hands.

In 1816 Wentworth was one of those instrumental in establishing the Bank of New South Wales, and his name appears second among the founders in the charter of 12 February 1817; he was one of the original directors and the second largest original shareholder. He had fewer setbacks than most of the other notable early residents of New South Wales in those days of cantankerousness and duelling, except for his quarrel with Governor **William Bligh**. Early in 1808 Bligh court-martialled Wentworth for allegedly misusing the labour of sick convicts for his private advantage; found guilty, Wentworth was sentenced to be reprimanded, but Bligh was not satisfied and two days later suspended him from his duties until he should hear from the British government. When Bligh refused to state the reason for his action, Wentworth protested to Fitzwilliam and to the Colonial Office, and in due course Castlereagh very properly told Bligh that his attitude was 'highly irregular'. Meanwhile this treatment had made Wentworth sympathetic to the rebels who overthrew the governor in January 1808; a court martial on Bligh's hitherto secret charges, which were discovered in his papers, resulted, as might have been expected, in the surgeon's acquittal. Wentworth was on good but not close terms with Governors **John Hunter** and **Philip Gidley King**, though he ultimately fell out with the latter; he was Governor Macquarie's personal physician as well as being on very friendly terms with him and his successor, **Sir Thomas Brisbane**. Thirty-seven years continuous residence in the colony made him one of the most significant and

influential of the early government officials and free settlers. Politically he was attached to the 'emancipist' party; socially as well as politically he was unacceptable to the party of **John Macarthur** and his 'exclusive' friends.

Wentworth was of no particular distinction as a medical officer, although the standard of medical science was not high at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but he was conspicuous for his humanity. In 1817 he submitted a valuable report, which was approved and adopted, on improvements in victualling and clothing the patients in the colonial hospitals. Wentworth was also noted for probity in his commercial transactions and for the skill with which he amassed a very considerable fortune, both in land and cash, so that when he died he was probably the wealthiest man in the colony. His salary as a medical officer reached the maximum of £365 when he was principal surgeon, and he also received £200 from the Crown when he was acting as superintendent of police; in 1806 he told Fitzwilliam that his total emoluments from all sources were in the order of £700 to £800 a year. His medical salary was paid directly to his agent in London, an old friend, Charles Cookney, who also acted as agent to Fitzwilliam and to Lord Melbourne; through him Wentworth arranged to import various necessities for his own use and for sale, and in later years Cookney offered a home from home for the successive Wentworth boys who were sent to England for their education. Through Cookney, loans, always repaid, were forthcoming from Fitzwilliam should the junior Wentworths require additional funds at the university, in preparation for the Bar, or to purchase a company in a regiment. A member of the Cookney family later worked in Australia as an architect, encouraged by the younger Wentworths.

In 1810 Wentworth, in conjunction with **Alexander Riley** and **Garnham Blaxcell**, contracted to build for Macquarie the so-called 'Rum Hospital', the predecessor of the Sydney Hospital. The direct cost to the government was approximately £4200, representing 80 oxen for slaughter, 20 convicts for three years worth £20 a year each, and 20 draught oxen on loan worth about £5 a year each, but Macquarie agreed to grant these three gentlemen permission to import a total of first 45,000 (204,574 litres) and then 65,000 gallons (295,496 litres) of rum, a generic term for all spirits. For four years, while the government and the army might import on their own account, other private importations were restricted. In return Wentworth and his friends contracted to build a hospital of over 3000 sq. feet (279 m²) to cater for over 200 sick. From the point of view of the governor it was a tremendous bargain; from the point of view of his critics it created an undeserved and undesirable monopoly. As Macquarie pointed out, the contractors were to pay a duty of 3s. a gallon on the spirits they imported; but although the British government did not cancel the contract it strongly criticized it as interfering with the freedom of trade which it desired in order to overcome smuggling, and on the grounds that a higher duty should be levied on imported spirits. Wentworth was far wealthier than either Riley or Blaxcell and without him the scheme would have been impossible. In the upshot the contractors were probably correct in their claim that they lost on the deal, though their enemies asserted that they made at least £10,000 each. This figure is undoubtedly a gross exaggeration.

In 1815 Wentworth had a tremendous row with Judge **Jeffery Hart Bent**, who refused to pay toll at the gates between Sydney and Parramatta and was accordingly fined 40s. by Wentworth, despite Bent's claim that he was in no way amenable to any criminal jurisdiction in the territory. In 1817 he was again the centre of controversy when Lieutenant-Colonel **George Molle** demanded his court martial as a result of disputes which arose from **William Charles Wentworth** writing a scurrilous 'pipe' about Molle's shortcomings. These 'frivolous and ridiculous' charges produced a display of acrimony all too common in New South Wales, including a vicious attack by Molle on Wentworth, but in the end the matter was disposed of by Judge-Advocate (**Sir**) **John Wylde**'s opportune discovery that Wentworth, as surgeon, was not liable to court martial for the offence alleged; however, Wentworth took care to tell Fitzwilliam of the matter in case another storm would be raised in England when the affair was reported there.

On various occasions Wentworth was appointed either alone or in association with others to undertake special inquiries into such occurrences as the very great mortality of convicts in the transport *General Hewitt* in 1814 and the shooting of prisoners in the *Chapman* in 1817. He also took the lead in supporting trial by jury and in advocating the election of a colonial legislature on the ground of 'no taxation without representation'. He was a member of the deputation which eulogized Governor Brisbane on his departure.

In accordance with normal custom Wentworth's salary as a medical officer was supplemented by land grants which in time, since he was active in land clearance and development, became very extensive. Apart from the land which he might have bought or obtained in payment of debts, Wentworth seems to have obtained his first grant of about 147 acres (59 ha) at Parramatta from Governor Hunter in 1799; by 1821 he had been awarded a total of 17,000 acres (6880 ha) while his two sons, William Charles and John, had 3450 (1396 ha) more, many of the later grants being in the Illawarra area. By his will Wentworth disposed of at least 22,000 acres (8903 ha) of land, much of it purchased. Today the Wentworths are the only family retaining in the male line land grants in Australia originally made by Governor Macquarie.

Despite his general popularity, comparative wealth and powerful connexions at home Wentworth mixed little in non-official social life. Although he held the King's commission and had held it before coming to New South Wales, the liberal views imbibed in the Ireland of his youth, which resulted in more than usual sympathy with the convict population, the background of his trials at the Old Bailey and the circumstances of his personal life in the colony all prevented him from fully sharing in the social round. Although he did not come out as a convict, there were widespread stories of the irregularity of his early days and of his failure to accompany the First Fleet as surgeon in the *Charlotte*. Obviously these could have been lived down and, so far as the later governors of his age were concerned, were lived down, but in addition he proved as popular with the female sex as he was asserted to be with general company. D'Arcy Wentworth acknowledged three sons of his name and descent, William Charles, D'Arcy who died without issue in 1861 aged 65, and John who died at sea as a petty officer in 1820. These three were educated in England and were accepted by Fitzwilliam and by the Irish Wentworths; from William Charles the present Australian Wentworth family is descended. In later years Wentworth supported at least seven other children and there is evidence in contemporary letters of a very happy family environment, even if it did not meet with legal approval. In his will he made ample provision for all his dependants. With his family at home D'Arcy Wentworth retained but a limited correspondence, though a number of his Irish friends and acquaintances, including a niece, Martha Bucknell, and her husband, came to New South Wales and sought his influence. The greater part of his correspondence to Britain was through Cookney, so he maintained his home ties and also his business relationships at the same time. In due course his Irish sisters and brother became proud of his success, admired his sons especially D'Arcy marching through Portadown as an ensign in the 73rd Regiment, and were thrilled to read *A Statistical, Historical, and Political Description of The Colony of New South Wales ...* (London, 1819) by William Charles Wentworth.

Wentworth was proud of his family descent and possessed for his own use a Cornelian stone set in gold with the arms of the Elmsal branch of the Wentworth family engraved upon it, as well as a large service of family silver. Annually he gave a dinner to commemorate his arrival in New South Wales, a settlement to which he became increasingly devoted. He was an enthusiastic race-goer, running his own horses and presenting an annual cup together with a liberal subscription to the organization. As early as May 1818 he sought permission to retire on half-pay because of 'my advanced period of life, my daily increasing infirmities, and the General very precarious State of my Health', yet after his resignation was accepted in 1819 and he was replaced as principal surgeon in October, as superintendent of police in April 1820 and as treasurer of the Police Fund in June, he was in good enough health to return to duty from 1821 to 1825 as superintendent of police when his successor, **William Minchin**, died soon after taking office. When Wentworth submitted his resignation in 1818 Macquarie testified to 'the indefatigable zeal, vigilance, activity, honor and integrity, universally manifested by him in the due execution and faithful discharge of his various important Public Duties', and when he died at

Homebush on 7 July 1827, the obituary in the *Monitor* was probably truer than most when it stated: 'He was a lover of freedom; a consistent steady friend of the people; a kind and liberal master; a just and humane magistrate; a steady friend and an honest man'. The service at his funeral at Parramatta was conducted by Samuel Marsden; the train of mourners, some 150 of whom had accompanied the body from Homebush, was said to be nearly a mile long.

It is impossible for anyone studying his career to obtain other than a favourable opinion of his character and relationships, whatever the irregularities of his private life. Convicts were ambitious to be in his service and his general outlook was friendly and humane. He made a major contribution to the early development of New South Wales, the more significant because he was so little associated with the belligerence and dissension so conspicuous a part of the local scene. Having regard to the circumstances of his private life the text engraved on his tombstone shows a pleasant sense of humour: 'In my father's house are many mansions'.

Select Bibliography










- *Historical Records of Australia*, series 1, vols 2-13, series 4, vol 1
- manuscript catalogue under D'Arcy Wentworth (State Library of New South Wales)
- Wentworth Woodhouse muniments (Sheffield Public Library).

Additional Resources

- [Trove search](#)

Related Entries in NCB Sites

view family tree

- **Wentworth, D'Arcy** 
- Wentworth, William Charles (son)  
- Wentworth, Sarah (daughter-in-law) 
- Towns, Robert (son-in-law) 
- Fisher, Thomasine (granddaughter) 
- Wentworth, Fitzwilliam (grandson) 
- Wentworth, D'Arcy Bland (grandson) 
- Sims, Jane Hobbins (employee) 

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