

CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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C.T. FORSCUTT

.....The story of an educational entrepreneur



Charles Thomas Forscutt - circa 1877

(family photo)

by

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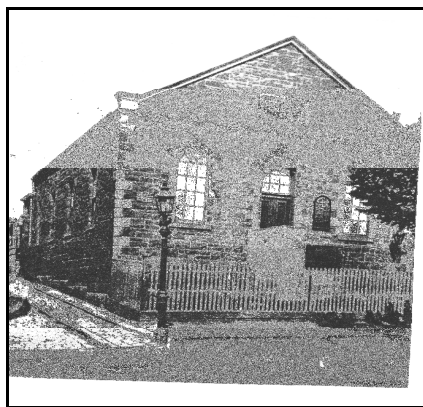
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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the mainline Protestant denominations in Australia developed primary and secondary schools to serve the educational needs of their adherents. While these were not exclusive of children from other denominations, they were, and remain relatively elitist organizations designed to produce men and women of refinement. Institutions with names like Methodist Ladies College and Presbyterian Ladies College come to mind.

Whether for reasons of doctrine, lack of interest, or lack of a critical mass within the communion, Churches of Christ collectively never became involved in the establishment of “denominational” school systems. Some individual church members however made remarkable contributions in establishing Christian schools. An early example is the Scottish/American bible colporteur Eliza Davies who in the mid 19thC established schools at Mt. Pleasant near Kiama on the NSW south coast, and at Flat Rock, North Sydney. Another example (considered here) is Charles Thomas (“CT”) Forscutt who established first a boys' school, then a “ladies' college” on a heritage property in the new Sydney suburb of Bexley/Rockdale.

As a young man, Forscutt joined the church at Hotham (Chetwynd Street, North Melbourne) in the 1870s. He was converted after hearing an address by an American evangelist.¹ Like other young men of the church, his skills as a potential preacher were developed in the local church debating society. As a result of this experience he was encouraged to train for the ministry



North Melbourne (Hotham) Church of Christ (circa 1900)

Student Years in Kentucky

Forscutt enrolled in Kentucky University at Lexington USA in 1878, completing the Arts course of the College of Arts and the Classical course of the College of the Bible. He completed his studies in 1886. This was a long period of studentship. Many young Australians attended the College of the Bible in the later 19th Century. Most candidates for ministry completed only the three year English course with biblical components. The classical course included the study of biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek and was effectively postgraduate. Forscutt was thus educated beyond the immediate requirements of ministry at that time, although he was keen to defend the importance of knowledge of biblical languages in theological training. Arguably, however, his education was a good preparation for academic leadership in a grammar school.

As a ministerial student, Forscutt had several pastorates in the Stone-Campbell heartland of Kentucky. He is credited with having been responsible for the repair and refitting of the Christian Church at Oxford KY in 1881.² This church had an “apostolic succession” stretching back to the Disciple pioneer “Raccoon” John Smith.³ Later, Forscutt ministered to the church at Ruddle's Lane not far from the Cane Ridge Meeting House associated with Barton W. Stone and the Kentucky revival. Forscutt records that in his last service at Ruddle's Lane in June 1886 “three persons joined [the church] so we protracted the meeting several days....and by Friday....rejoiced that eighteen more were added”⁴.

Because of their neutrality Australian students were often allocated to parishes which had been riven by the American Civil War. Forscutt recounted preaching in churches where some twenty years after the Civil War parishioners wore their guns to church, with the Unionists sitting on one side and the Confederates on the other.

Forscutt was always critical of the Australians who trained in the USA but did not return to Australia [estimated by him in 1886 to be only about one in five]. He determined not to do this. Passing up a lucrative offer of a professorial appointment in the USA, he entertained

ministry invitations from the churches at Cheltenham Vic and Enmore NSW. Enmore held the challenge of ministering to a church with a new chapel in a new location and he accepted its offer.

Ministries in Australia

En route to Sydney, Forscutt spent a few weeks in Melbourne. He found the city had changed considerably since his departure almost nine years before. He reported in the *Christian Standard* that Melbourne was now a city of around 350,000 persons with twelve Churches of Christ and around 2000 members, served by eight full-time ministers. He took the opportunity to appeal for more evangelists to come to Australia.

Forscutt was warmly welcomed at a public meeting at his home church at Hotham presided over by the eminent A.B. Maston. He preached at several city churches and visited Ballarat and Geelong before entraining for Sydney where he was met by a delegation from Enmore and other Sydney churches.

In the 1880s the church at Newtown had outgrown its “Christian Chapel” and erected a formidable building in the adjacent suburb of Enmore. Forscutt’s appointment was designed to coincide with the opening of the new building - shortly afterwards named “Enmore Tabernacle” - on October 24 1886. Forscutt spoke at the opening services and at the official welcome and reception. He conducted his first baptisms on 3 November 1886. [Music at The Tabernacle was still acapella and Forscutt found that though he was allowed to preach he could not preside, being an unmarried person].⁵



Enmore Tabernacle circa 1900 (Source: Jubilee History)

In January 1888 Forscutt married Louisa Francis who was to exercise an enormous influence in his later career. In April that year he indicated to the church that he would not be seeking re-employment at the expiration of his contract. The following month he visited the Manning River area preaching to gatherings at Taree, Chatham and Cundelton. Later he visited Dubbo. He was farewelled from Enmore on 15 October 1888 and with his wife departed for Melbourne. During his term as minister at Enmore 150 persons were added to the church.⁶

For the next 2 1/2 years Forscutt undertook evangelistic campaigns and short term ministries in Victoria. This included a period of almost twelve months at Hope Street, Geelong, church where he had an effective ministry. However, in May 1891 he put his furniture up for auction. The auction advertisement indicated his impending departing for Europe. It seems, however, that together with his wife and little daughter Alice Francis, he returned to Sydney. Forscutt was destined for a different vocation.

Rockdale College for Boys

The record indicates that in 1892 Forscutt established a small private school at St. Peters, not far from his former parish of Newtown/Enmore. Later, taking advantage of the bank crash of the 1890s, Forscutt acquired a stately home, "The Heaning", in Gladstone Road, Bexley. The college was relocated there. Rockdale College, as it was now called, operated as a boarding college for boys, attracting the sons of some the state's leading families.



Rockdale College Cricket Team – Forscutt front left (photo courtesy Rockdale City Council)

Forscutt promoted the school strongly and it appeared to have a rich sporting and social life centred on concerts, speech days and garden parties. End of year prizegivings were grand affairs – used not only to reward students but to publicize the school. A report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* indicates an attendance of 300 people at the prize distribution of 1902. It offers the following description:

The Bavarian Band played selections during the afternoon. Archdeacon Langley presided and among those seated on the platform was the Hon. H.T. Waddell who distributed the prizes. Devotional exercises were conducted by the Rev. Scott-Fletcher.....The Rev. C.T. Forscutt ...said that the closing year had been one of the most successful in the college history...with 84 students on the roll including many from distant countries such as India, China, Fiji etc....⁷

The school continued to flourish and in 1904 a two storey brick complex was added, providing additional dormitory, classroom and teacher accommodation. It was run as a Christian school with the boys expected to attend a Church of England service each Sunday unless their parents desired them to attend another church. As the above report shows, clergy participated at school functions.

Around this time, Forscutt bought up other parcels of land in the Bexley/Rockdale area to secure the future of the College and his family. A second daughter, Olive was born in 1903.

Bexley Ladies' College

Following a tragic accident in 1906 [related apparently to a student falling from a verandah] the boys' college was closed, but the facility reopened in 1908 as Bexley Ladies' College. This was to be “an exclusive finishing school for the daughters of wealthy gentleman”. Forscutt stayed with the successful format of the boys' school but added “refining” subjects like music and painting to the curriculum. His daughter Alice, an accomplished musician, prepared pupils for public music examinations. A comprehensive range of women's sports was offered



Tennis in the grounds of the Ladies' College, circa 1910 (*photo courtesy Rockdale City Council*)

The report of the prizegiving of December 1910 lists reveals a wide range of subjects including drawing, bookkeeping and shorthand.⁸ It indicates that the dux of the school was Miss Hazel Rofe. Hazel Rofe was a member of an Enmore Church of Christ family and later became the aunt of the long serving NSW missionary, Rosalie Rofe.



Louisa Forscutt (seated right) with students. Daughter Alice who later became Principal of the College is in back row (far left) – *photo courtesy Rockdale City Council.*

As at Rockdale College, the Forscutts managed to attract high ranking politicians to the speech days and garden parties. As the war clouds gathered over Europe in 1914, a “by invitation only” garden party was held in the grounds to meet the Prime Minister Joseph Cook and Mrs. Cook, along with the Speaker of the Federal Parliament (then based in Melbourne) W.E. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson. An account of the event in the Sydney Morning Herald gave no hint of the impending crisis enveloping the world and Johnson appeared to use his speech to defend his performance as Speaker.⁹



Speech Day in the Grounds of the College *(photo courtesy Rockdale City Council)*

During the war, the College scaled back its non-curricular activities, and energy was put into the war effort. A charge was imposed for the annual concert with the proceeds going towards the “Belgian [i.e. Flanders] funds”. Louisa Forscutt and two other ladies set up the Bexley branch of the Red Cross with a purpose of raising funds to assist the war effort. The group met regularly in one of the college classrooms.

In 1917, daughter Alice married W (William) F.H Melleuish an accomplished local musician. In 1920, Forscutt now 63 years old, decided to retire and control of the college was handed over to Alice who with her husband continued to run it conjointly for the next 15 years.

The Retirement Years

Released from grind of school administration, Forscutt devoted his energies to other interests. He was a man not only of strong religious commitment, but also strong political passion. Notwithstanding the upper/middle class pretensions of his schools, Forscutt was not beyond haranguing the crowds in Sydney's Domain. And despite the clerical garb and title, he never outgrew his association with the “brethren and sisters” at Enmore Church of Christ, attending services there occasionally and preaching. His daughter, Olive was

married at The Tabernacle in 1926 to Enos Hudson. He was a patriot, empire loyalist and a royalist. He was president of the Protestant Defence Association and on one occasion a speech in the domain on the Irish situation provoked a near riot. He tried unsuccessfully to raise public and government interest in a tour of the battlefields of Europe and Gallipoli where some of his “boys” had been killed in the fighting. The proposed tour involved equipping a ship, travelling to the battle areas and planting shrubs and trees in Australian war cemeteries. He spoke out against the objections to the visit of Australia by the Prince of Wales in 1920 and wrote a hymn “God Save the Prince of Wales” in the Prince’s honour. Unwisely, as it now seems, he allowed school premises to be used by elements of the New Guard which later led the putsch against the Lang Labor government and was linked to the infamous cutting of the ribbon by Captain De Groot at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1931.

Frustrated in his attempts to lead a tour to the battlefields, Forscutt and wife Louisa travelled overseas privately in 1922. He visited relatives in England, made a pilgrimage to Amiens in France to visit the battlefields and Australian war memorials there. He then travelled to the USA to visit churches and places linked to his student days. He was still remembered by older members of the congregations he served.

He returned again to England in 1928. This visit was part of the Scottish-Australian delegation to landmarks associated with the birth and early years of the explorer and navigator Captain James Cook.¹⁰ The program for the pilgrimage lists his name and a vice-president. He addressed several gatherings apparently in this capacity.

Close to Forscutt's heart was his old home church at Hotham (Chetwyn Street, North Melbourne). He visited there in 1918, but in 1930 took off with his wife Louisa in his 1928 Ford tourer to visit the church for its Diamond Jubilee. At 73 years of age, Forscutt was deemed to be one of the church's oldest surviving members. The trip was no mean undertaking at that age, in such a car, and over the road conditions at the time!

Forscutt wrote a poem especially for this Jubilee occasion. Clearly Hotham had a special place in his heart. The poem – sentimental but moving – recalls his memories of others (the “Greens, the Geddes, the Floods etc) who served the Lord faithfully in that place. It reads [extracts]....

Some sixty years ago today,
 Since this church saw it natal day,
 Her children meet as years go by,
 To think of those beyond the sky.....

Bring back in thought and mem'ry dear,
 “our Fathers” names whom we revere,
 Green, Geddes, Flood, Fergus and Pearl,
 Clark, Horton, Minahan and Earl.....

Methinks I hear “My Mother's Prayer”
 When first I left her tender care
 And wandered o'er the world so wide,
 I feel once more she's by my side.....

IT CAN'T [Forscutt's emphasis] be long till folks here,
 Shall feel the throb of death's dread fear,
 So let us live, that when we die,
 We'll meet our loved ones in the sky..

To what extent that second last stanza is biographical is not clear – but it suggests the role of a caring mother in his life's journey. Certainly, within six months of his visit to Hotham, Forscutt himself “felt the throb of death's dread fear.” In December 1930 Charles and Louisa attended the College speech day as special guests but shortly after, he became ill and died on April 7 1931.

A funeral service was held at the College followed by interment in the Methodist section of Rookwood cemetery. Services were conducted by his old friends - former Enmore ministers - G.T Walden, R.K. Whately and Ira Paternoster.

His biographer¹¹ describes him as “a great evangelist, a persuasive speaker and a competent administrator.” And indeed he was. He was somewhat of a polymath - with a wide range of interests and opinions. His real interest, however, appears to be in

education - interests which he passed on to his children and grandchildren. His daughter Alice (Melleuish) was an accomplished musician and served Bexley College as principal for 36 years. His late grandson Ian Hudson (1928 - 2009) was a greatly respected primary school teacher and grandson Wayne Hudson holds professorial positions at Charles Sturt University and the University of Tasmania. A great grandson, Gregory Melleuish is an associate professor at the University of Wollongong.

Forscutt's son-in-law William Melleuish died in 1935 at the age of 44, leaving his wife Alice to continue as sole Principal of the Ladies' College. The college closed in 1956 and Alice Melleuish died in 1962



C.T. Forscutt, daughter Olive and wife Louisa circa 1910
(photo courtesy Rockdale City Council)

References

¹ May have been O.A. Carr who as a graduate of both the College of Arts and the College of the Bible of Kentucky University may have served as an exemplar to Forscutt who followed a similar academic program.

² [www://rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kyscott/Oxford.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kyscott/Oxford.htm)).

³ Ibid. "Racoon" John Smith was an influential Disciples of Christ frontier evangelist. *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* describes him as "largely self-educated yet devoted to constantly deeper study of the bible" (p.691)

⁴ Hudson, N p.7

⁵ In his report on NSW in the *Jubilee History*, R.C. Gilmour writes curiously that at the start of the 1890s "our musical culture was down in the depths of the ocean. Now [1900] we possess are fair number of talented musicians. Some of these are entitled to put mystic symbols such as ALCM or LLCM in company of their names" (p.306).

⁶ The *Jubilee History* reports over 200 additions – but this includes conversions in other areas of NSW

⁷ *SMH* 15/12/1902 p.8

⁸ *SMH* 22/12/1910 p.9

⁹ *SMH* 27/7/1914 p10

¹⁰ Associated with the bicentenary of the birth of Cook. It's not clear how Forscutt came be associated with the Scottish-Australian delegation

¹¹ Noelene Hudson – see bibliography

Bibliography

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[Noelene and her husband Ian – referred to above – were active in Churches of Christ in NSW for many years. Noelene was president of the NSW CoC Christian Women's Fellowship in 1986]

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