Camden to London and Paris: The Role of the Macarthur Family in the Early New South Wales Wine Industry

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Abstract

The wine industry has been largely overlooked as a subject of historical analysis in Australian history despite its significance in the nineteenth century and its renewed vigour in the late 1900s. This article situates the development of a particular aspect of the industry within a broader consideration of the themes of colonization. It outlines the role of the Macarthur family in wine growing as well as exploring William Macarthur's view of viticulture as a means of moving beyond pastoralism to further ‘civilize’ the colony of New South Wales.

This article traces a particular sample of efforts to develop European agriculture in New South Wales as the next, more ‘civilized’ step after pastoralism within the broader context of Enlightenment-influenced colonial entrepreneurship. The development of agriculture generally – and wine growing, or viticulture and oenology, in particular – was a much more complex and uneven process than was often represented in the traditional historical narrative of Australia in which wool, gold and wheat were portrayed as nation-building commodities, often to the exclusion of other less iconic primary products. William Macarthur was among those who perceived that wine growing could ‘civilize’ New South Wales. National histories no longer abbreviate the role of the Macarthur family to John Macarthur’s contribution to the creation of a wool industry; his wife Elizabeth is recognised as a grazier in her own right. What has not been explored in depth by historians, however, is the role of William Macarthur and his father and brothers in the growth of the New South Wales wine industry in the mid-nineteenth century or, indeed, the broader cultural, economic and scientific significance of the industry.¹

The trajectory ‘Camden to London and Paris’ refers to Camden as the site of the Macarthur family’s successful commercial scale vineyards and winery, London as the financial and scientific centre of the British Empire and a potential market for colonial wine, and Paris as the capital of the world’s premier wine producing nation. The cultural significance of quality wine made it necessary to make a good impression on the French and other...
European wine buyers. The notion of the transference of a product from the periphery of empire – Camden – to the metropole had particular significance in relation to wine growing. There was virtually no knowledge of wine grape production in Britain itself during the colonial era, and although there was an official desire to create a wine industry in New South Wales, the initiative, investment and knowledge acquisition was almost entirely the responsibility of colonials.

The broader context in which New South Wales colonists built a wine industry included increasingly refined colonial practices by Britain, and other European powers. These practices involved the marginalization or subjugation of native peoples and the creation of a colonial economy to produce exportable products – such as rice and tobacco in North America. In the seventeenth century for example, in an effort to promote a colonial wine industry in the North American colonies, the British government went as far as enacting laws to encourage the planting of wine grapes, though these policies failed.

After the loss of Britain’s mainland American possessions, New South Wales was colonised in the late eighteenth century not only to punish and reform convicted felons but also to enlarge the British colonial network of primary production, manufacture and trade. It has been argued that

the origins, the transferability and the contestability of the conception of the British Empire as Protestant, commercial, maritime and free are what marked it as an ideology – rather than as an identity.

The ideology of empire in which New South Wales was declared a British colony required as rapid as possible economic independence and contribution to the British trading network, despite the fact that the first colonisers were not privately financed agriculturalists but military officers and prisoners without basic farming skills. Although the colony was established as a remote prison, dozens of European plant varieties which had the potential to be grown as cash crops – including wine grape cuttings – were included on the First Fleet and continued to be sent to New South Wales by influential botanist Joseph Banks into the early nineteenth century.

To put the British interest in wine growing into cultural perspective: wine was a status symbol with a mystique of power, healing and plenty inherited from both the Judeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman cultural traditions that underpinned European ‘civilization’. In the early efforts to create a wine industry in New South Wales – the symbolism of vines and ‘civilization’ were linked to the botanical experimentation that had become part of British colonial practice. When Governor Arthur Phillip ordered a few vine cuttings collected from the Cape of Good Hope to be planted in his garden at Sydney Cove in early 1788 there was a multi-layered meaning to the action. He was experimenting with European plants in new soils and climate; he was importing the English habit of decorating the gentleman’s ornamental garden with grape vines; he was also transplanting a symbol of
European ‘civilization’ that was derived from Classical culture along with Old Testament stories of wealth and plenty and New Testament stories of miracles and transubstantiation.

The economic significance of wine was that, by the late eighteenth century, British upper classes and wealthy planters and merchants across the Empire were buying increasing amounts of fortified wines from the Iberian Peninsula and fine wines from France. When, in 1787, the First Fleet was fitted out for its voyage to New South Wales, the total official quantity of wine imported into the United Kingdom from Portugal, Spain and France was close to six million gallons. Royal Navy vessels also carried wine for its officers and for medicinal purposes, such as treating scurvy, and the rise in merchant and navy shipping traffic from Europe led to the development of plantation vineyards at Madeira and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic, as well as the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and parts of Central and South America. In 1788 none of these colonial vineyards were British, which increased the value of New South Wales colonists’ efforts to establish wine grapes.

In terms of science: during the first twenty years of the colony high-ranking officials Arthur Phillip, William Paterson and Philip Gidley King were at various times in contact with Joseph Banks about the progress of wine growing. Governor Phillip reported that his garden vines did throw a few bunches but they were neglected due to the more pressing issue of avoiding starvation with no knowledge of the new farming environment and virtually no agricultural expertise among the officers or the convicts. Phillip did encourage one promising viticulturalist: a retired German soldier who had grown-up on a family estate with a vineyard on the banks of the Rhine River. This settler, Philip Schaeffer, was trialling wine grapes and other crops, at the same time as an experimental vineyard of about eight thousand vines was being cultivated at the government farm at Parramatta. Wine grapes were also being trialled in Van Diemen’s Land and at Norfolk Island. Unfortunately, Schaeffer’s vines suffered the same mysterious blight as the government vines, and although he apparently produced some wine, his enterprise failed. Later, in 1804, Governor Philip Gidley King was forced to write to the Colonial Secretary that two French prisoners of war sent to the colony four years earlier to foster wine growing were unskilled after all. King wrote that wine they made from the best grapes had ‘turned out so bad that I shall not trouble your Lordship with the sample I intended sending’. What is not stated by King in this letter, or in the dozens of official dispatches – back and forth from London – either talking up the possibility of wine growing or lamenting yet another failure, is the complexity of the process of raising wine grapes and manufacturing wine.

With the difficulties of wine growing in mind, the story of the role of the Macarthur family in the early New South Wales wine industry actually begins in 1794 when, three years after their arrival in New South Wales, Marines Lieutenant John Macarthur, and his wife Elizabeth, had
built a most excellent brick house [which included a cellar and was] . . . surrounded by a vineyard and garden of about three acres; the former full of vines and fruit-trees, and the latter abounding in the most excellent vegetables.\textsuperscript{12}

Notice that the vineyard John and Elizabeth describe is quite large. Even if it is only a third of the three-acre garden then it was quite a substantial planting; a classic English gentleman’s garden, complete with row upon row of grape vines. It is likely, however, that the Macarthurs’ gardeners did not know the varietal origins of the vines, let alone whether they were table or wine grapes. It’s possible, too, that the position of the vines was no more suitable than Schaeffer’s or the government vineyards, and they may have been pulled out quite soon. The sight of rows of blighted vines would certainly have been less than ‘civilized’.

The Macarthurs grew very wealthy from whaling, shipping and wool and it was some time before John Macarthur was able to address the problem that the desire to grow wine grapes in New South Wales was not matched with sufficient knowledge of viticulture and oenology. In 1815 Macarthur was in exile in England, for a second time, for allegedly masterminding the coup against Governor William Bligh seven years earlier. With him in England were his four sons, Edward, John Junior, James and William. The two youngest boys had been born in New South Wales and educated during their childhood by a French migrant called Huon de Kerilleau, who no doubt talked to them about France and wine. In the northern hemisphere Spring of 1815, John Senior – debt-ridden and in search of new sources of income – took the younger boys on a fact-finding tour of France and Switzerland. According to seventeen year-old James’s journal, his father was searching for skills and plant stocks for what had become classic colonial staple crops – and which had also been trialled on the east coast of North America: wine, silk, olives and poppy seeds.\textsuperscript{13}

There is very little material on John Macarthur’s thinking beyond this, though one letter to John Junior, in April 1815, has survived. John Macarthur wrote to his son that:

\begin{quote}
Fortunately they have not commenced Pruning their vines in the vineyards . . . So that I shall have an opportunity of seeing the whole process of pruning, planting and preparing the soil. The method which they adopt, is the same as that practiced in Burgundy and the . . . Provinces where the choicest wines are produced, altho the Wine here is of very inferior quality_this inferiority is attributable to the Soil, aspect, climate and other unknown causes, and not to the want of [expertise] in the Culture of the Vine.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Macarthur could have been forced to learn about wine growing in an ‘inferior’ region because of the continuing antipathy to the English in France (the Macarthurs were still ‘English’ to the French). There may be more to it, however, as James wrote in May 1815, when the party of travellers arrived at Montreux, near Vevey in Switzerland ‘it seemed as if fate had led us to this beautiful Village to meet the very man we most wished to find’. This
man was Mr Dufour, a Swiss who had spent some time in North America trialling wine growing. And, significantly, Dufour told the Macarthurs that the vines in America had at first failed in the same way that they had done in New Holland; but that by dint of perserverance he had at length made them succeed and he explained the reasons of their failure.

John Macarthur stayed to learn from Mr Dufour until February the following year. Unfortunately there is no record of William Macarthur’s impressions of this tour, though the vast, old vine plantings and the work of the peasant vinedressers must have contributed to the way in which later imagined his own vineyard both visually and as part of a ‘civilized’ estate. By 1817 John, James and William were back in New South Wales. The first Macarthur vineyard on a commercial scale was planted out in 1820.

While the Macarthurs were in Europe, wine growing had experienced continued mixed fortunes in the colony. There was certainly interest in developing commercial as well as ornamental plantings but Gregory Blaxland stood out as the most intrepid potential vigneron up until the 1820s. He wrote to Governor Lachlan Macquarie in July 1816, that although floods had ruined his crop he would carry on; ‘from my first coming into the Colony I intended to cultivate the grape, but have been retarded by the want of practical knowledge myself’. This letter is interesting not only for its declaration of Blaxland’s determination to find a way to profit from grapes – but also for several other points: his description of abandoned vines, which paints a stark picture of failed small-scale farming around his own Brush Farm, at present-day Eastwood in Sydney; his calculation that some of the abandoned vines were grown from seeds, which is likely an incorrect appraisal, and his admission that he knew nothing about viticulture but that he had tried to ‘further his knowledge’. There were no laws insisting on wine growing as there had been in the American colonies and the problem of a lack of knowledge was, by this stage, left to New South Wales entrepreneurs such as the Macarthurs, Blaxland, John Dunmore Lang and James King – as well as wine enthusiast James Busby – to resolve. Macarthur, Busby and King are recognised as part of a group of published ‘prophets of the vine’ that included John Bleasdale in Victoria and Alexander Kelly in South Australia.

In London, meanwhile, private interest was high in the potential for a colonial wine industry. John Macarthur Junior wrote to his brother in 1821, and asked whether ongoing experimentation had produced results:

How, my dear James, proved your vines? Can you discover the various descriptions, & have you found any soil adapted for a vineyard? I hope Sir Thomas Brisbane [then Governor] or the Commissioner [Bigge] will ere long recommend the encouragement of some French & German families, and perhaps Spaniards, who may facilitate your praiseworthy [enterprise].

But it would be more than a decade before the Macarthurs and other colonists sought official support for the migration of experienced vinedressers.
And, although John urged James, ‘I need hardly repeat that none of your pursuits are viewed with more interest than the cultivation of the olive and vine’, it was Blaxland, not the Macarths who would first send samples of his newly made red wine to the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerces in London, in 1822. The Society rewarded his efforts with a Silver medal and the lukewarm assessment that it was ‘by no means of superior quality, yet it affords a reasonable ground of expectation that by care and time it may become a valuable article of export’.

John Macarthur was obviously thinking about export potential when he wrote to John Junior, in 1824, that the first vintage of Camden Wine produced by twenty-four year-old William, from the vines planted in 1820, included a white that resembled Hock – a German riesling – and that it might find a market in India. Bottles of this earliest vintage were sent to England but more as curiosities since there remained confusion over vine varieties and the best sites to plant them.

Despite the poor results in this period, colonial knowledge on wine growing was improving and in 1830 William Macarthur planted a new vineyard at Camden on a site chosen more carefully than the first. This second vineyard was initially twenty-two acres with a river-side boundary about two hundred yards from the Nepean River. Although the Macarths could well afford to invest in developing the new vineyard they still lacked experienced labour. With the help of Edward – the family’s representative in London after the death of their brother John – William was among the viticulturalists who expanded the migration of indentured farm labours from Britain to Camden to include German vinedressers.

The Macarths were interested in recruiting vinedressers from Germany, Switzerland or France, and had hoped that two or three hundred skilled labourers could address the lack of experience that impeded the development of wine growing. It seems it was bureaucratic and political circumstances that led to the choice of German vinedressers, many of whom went on to develop branches of the industry in areas further inland in the colony such as Albury and Mudgee. It turned out to be a bureaucratic nightmare, however, for Edward Macarthur to transport the six German families who first agreed to travel to New South Wales. He had to argue in long and strongly worded correspondence with a Colonial Under-secretary that the Macarths had no choice but to hire dreaded ‘foreigners’ because farmers in the British Isles were ‘entirely ignorant’ of wine growing and other colonists would benefit from the knowledge the Germans could offer. In the same letter Edward went on to say that wine was an excellent potential export as well as a more ‘civilized’ alcoholic beverage for the notoriously rum-drunk labouring classes; and there was no point in colonial investment without government support for them to succeed. It is likely that economic factors influenced the decision to remove the obstacles to government support for the German vinedressers though British officials made it clear they were still very reluctant to allow non-British migration.
In the fifteen years following the arrival of the Germans in the late 1830s, William contributed a considerable body of knowledge to colonial viticulture through newspaper letters on vine cultivation. By the late 1840s his wine was selling well in New South Wales through agents in Sydney and, as a principal wine grower among dozens established in the colony, he held the position of president of the New South Wales Vineyard Association. At this mid-point in the century, as William and his brother James contributed to debates on the issue of self-government for the Australian colonies, William was ready to make a serious effort to launch his wines into the metropolitan market. The New South Wales wine industry came of age at the same time as the colony itself and in 1851 William sent a selection of wines from Camden to the London Exhibition, an expo of goods from Europe and the empire.

A booklet published for the London expo, titled *Some Account of the Vineyards at Camden on the Nepean River, Forty Miles South West of Sydney, the Property of James and William Macarthur*, indicated eight different Camden wines were exhibited in London. The text of the booklet declared that these wines have a certain dryness and bitterness peculiar to the Wines of New South Wales, to which the palate becomes accustomed: but with age this bitterness passes off, as in the specimens now in England.

The wines were promoted as an agricultural product likely to benefit both New South Wales and England. William hoped his wines would be as successful as the Macarthur’s ‘golden fleece’ and that the ‘tired artizan’ of England would eventually ‘in his hours of relaxation from toil’ call for a quart of Australian wine. The published version of this booklet was edited from an original hand-written version by William, which was surprisingly frank and self-deprecating but even with editing failed to stir up much interest. While there were steady requests for Camden wine as a curiosity in the next few years, official figures show that Australian wine didn’t begin to arrive at British ports in any quantity until 1854, when only 1400 gallons was imported.

In relation to the perceived civilising effects of wine as a crop as well as a beverage, however, *Some Account of the Vineyards at Camden* revealed William Macarthur's vision for wine growing as a part of a long-term agriculturalist future for New South Wales. Pastoralism may have built the Macarthur’s wealth but this wealth allowed the creation of a model of tenant farming closer to ‘the classic model of the English gentleman’ at Camden Park. William, and likely his brothers James and Edward, shared the Enlightenment-influenced philosophy that it was possible to build colonial wealth, and a better society, by moving beyond pastoralism, which was perceived as less an end in itself than a step in ‘taming’ the land for a ‘civilized’ agricultural society of tenants and yeomen. In line with William’s thinking, Edward Macarthur wrote in one of his private publications lobbying for land sales to fund immigration bounties that British government
investment in assisting the migration of an increased labour force would promote ‘coextensive commerce’ and ‘universal civilization throughout the empire’.  

Alongside commercial interests, the ideologies of empire that underpinned the way the Macarthurs viewed their entrepreneurial role gave them a strong sense of being part of a ‘civilization’ but it wasn’t until 1855 when 55 year-old William Macarthur went with his wine to the Paris Exhibition that he was able to make the impact he had long sought in showing how civilised his colony had become. As a Colonial Commissioner, William was at the centre of proceedings. Before the New South Wales wines were inspected William made sure to watch the Paris jury at work. The experience of witnessing the ‘jury of “experts’” testing upwards of a hundred and fifty wines in a single sitting left him ‘in a funk for our wine’. But his letter to James on the judging went on to describe that, when the tasting of the New South Wales wines started at eight o’clock the next morning, ‘there was a long pause at the tasting of the first [James] King’s red of 1852[,] a look of surprise, and then of approval “jolie vin” “tres bon” . . . and ten called out’. (The scores were given out of twenty.) After the judging was over William calculated that: ‘the averages of the six samples from [wine grower James King at] Irrawang, was 10-and-a-half to that of Camden Wine was 11-and-two-thirds’. Even more favourably, when he spoke later to a judge he was told:

we were all perfectly astonished at the quality of the Australian wines – we had tasted the slightest . . . of it, & it is evident that in addition to soil and climate favourable to their growth first care must have been taken in their manufacture. They do your colony infinite credit. I asked to what European or other wines he could compare them. He said ‘we were unanimous in giving them a place in strength & flavour between the wines of Madeira and those of the Cotes du Rhone – they have some resemblance to both.’ I cannot describe the number of applications as have since had to be showed to taste.

The following day Queen Victoria and her entourage stopped at the New South Wales exhibit and the Victoria asked to be able to taste the wines. And with a ‘certainly your majesty’ William Macarthur had finally conquered not only Paris but London as well. The Times’ ‘very own correspondent’ wrote that during Queen and Prince Albert’s visit to the Paris Expo:

Mr McArthur [sic] was too modest to tell the Prince a ‘fact’ which is creating a great sensation here, viz. – that Australia exhibits wine of extraordinary excellence, Tokay especially being fairer than the best produced in Hungary.

Now, Hungary wasn’t France, Spain or Portugal but this was considerable praise.  
William and other colonists received a considerable increase in sales after this, and in 1855 close to twenty-five thousand gallons of Australian wine (from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia) was imported into the United Kingdom, a figure which would not be repeated again until a
decade later as demand also increased in the colonies. Paris marked the beginning of a strong exhibition culture for Australian wines and gave growers and agricultural societies leverage to seek increased support from the British government and ‘overseas learned societies’ to promote colonial wine in Europe.⁵

In the heady new climate of success a Times report of 1857 predicted ‘in a few years we hope to see the names of Camden Park, Irrawang, Tomago, Lochinvar, Carwarra, Tuteela, &c. rank as high in the wine-market as Lafitte, Latour, Chateau-Margaux’. The report went on to say that perhaps wine would eventually equal ‘wool, tallow, gold and coal’ as export commodities from the eastern Australian colonies.

The New South Wales wine industry might have contributed the same wealth to the economy as these other primary products if its fortunes had rested entirely on the efforts of large-scale producers and the hundreds of small-acreage growers who had plantings by the end of the nineteenth century. A culture of wine drinking was not popular, however, among the ‘native born youth’ who James Busby had hoped could be tamed or subdued – transformed into contented yeoman by the mystique of wine. By 1900 more than ten times as much beer was consumed as wine or spirits in New South Wales. Despite the efforts of entrepreneurs like the Macarthurs the New South Wales wine industry and the consumption by colonial Australians of table wine remained modest into the twentieth century and not the ‘civilizing’ social and economic force it was imagined it could be.

Short Biography

After being awarded a University Medal in History/English at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, in 2004, Julie McIntyre left a media career to begin a History Ph.D. at University of Sydney. Julie had taught in Broadcast Journalism at University of Newcastle for several years but has been better able to combine her teaching and research interests by tutoring in units in Australian History at University of Sydney in 2006. Julie’s research interests include wine history, rural and agricultural history, colonisation/post-colonialism; she works principally with cultural historical and transnational research techniques. The working title of her Ph.D. is ‘Foundations of an Australian Industry: Wine Growing in New South Wales 1788–1900’. Her paper on the role of wine in British efforts to ‘civilize’ Aborigines in early New South Wales has been accepted for publication in the journal History Australia.

Notes

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William Paterson to Joseph Banks, 17 March 1795, Banks Papers, MLMSS A81 CY3005/68.

Governor Philip Gidley King to Lord Hobart, 1 March 1804 in *HRA* I, IV (Sydney: The Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1915), 460.

There are many publications on this subject see, for example, works that William Macarthur is known to have read, which are among the first Australian books on wine published in English: James Busby, *A Treatise on the Culture of the Vine and Art of Making Wine; Compiled from the Works of Chaptal, and other French Writers; and From the Notes of the Compiler during a Residence in Some of the Wine Provinces in France* (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1979 [1825]); Busby, *A Manual of Plain Directions for Planting and Cultivating a Vineyard and for Making Wine in New South Wales* (Sydney: Published by R. Mansfield for the executors of R. Howe, 1830). The second book was published to try to make the potential for wine growing more readily understandable for New South Wales colonists.


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27 See for example one of dozens of letters from Sydney merchant Didier Numa Joubert; Didier Joubert to James Macarthur, 2 November 1848, Macarthur Family Papers, MLMSS 2969, n.p.; *Annual Report of the New South Wales Vineyard Association* (Sydney: Printed by D. L. Welch, 1851) held at National Library of Australia.
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