

A Biography of Robert Parry (1822- 1882)

Robert, the third child of Sarah and Evan Parry, lived a nomadic lifestyle from an early age with each of his nine siblings being born in different counties across England and Wales.¹ The resilience and self-confidence Robert developed in childhood would sustain him throughout the hardships of his later years.

Robert Parry was born on 14 October 1822 at Newtown, Montgomery, Wales.² Newtown, situated on the Severn River, was a rapidly expanding market town and hub for the Welsh textile and flannel industries. Robert's father Evan, shown in figure 1, was an itinerant Wesleyan Minister whose circuit included English and Welsh counties.³ Before the age of two Robert had the first of many changes he would experience throughout his life when his family moved to Herefordshire.

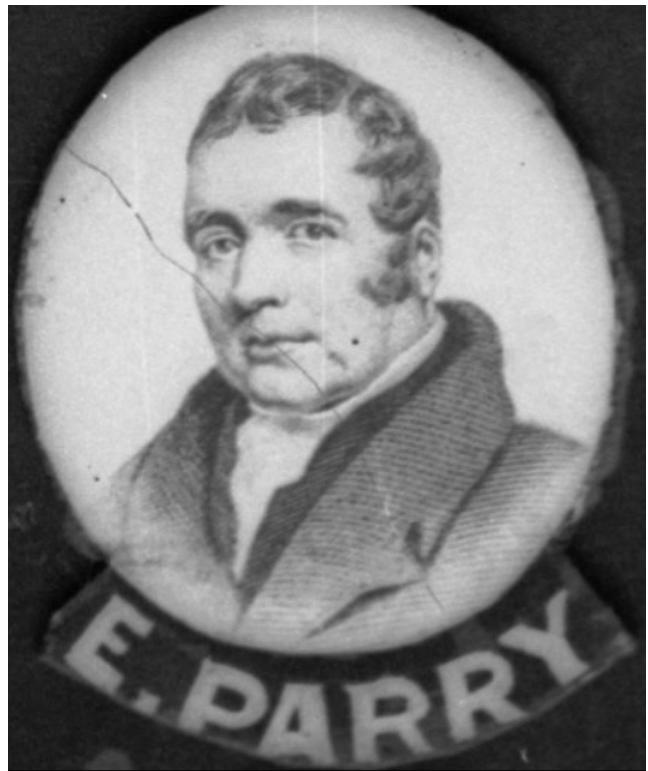


Figure 1: Marshall Claxton, *Reverend Evan Parry*, 1830, painted portrait, Welsh Wesleyan Ministers, Source: National Library of Wales, <https://tinyurl.com/yb2lls2m>, digital image, Accessed 14 September 2018.

¹ Siblings of Robert Parry, showing the family movements through their place of birth; Birth Record for John Parry, 1 June 1818, Parish of Llanelli, Breconshire, Wales, Parish Register, Family History Library microfilm 104,474; Ancestry, Birth Record for Sarah Anne Parry, 18 July 1820, Ludlow, Shropshire, England, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, Birth Record for Elizabeth Catharine Parry, 16 July 1824, Kington, Herefordshire, England, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, Birth Record for Edward Parry, 5 August 1826 Monmouth, Monmouthshire, England, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, Birth Record for James Jarret Parry, 27 October 1828, Bath, Somerset, England, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, Birth Record for William Parry, 7 Jun 1831, Melksham, Wiltshire, England, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, Birth Record for Elizabeth Parry, 1 Dec 1833, Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan, Wales, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018; Ancestry, birth record for Caroline Parry, 13 Apr 1838, Downend, Gloucester, England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975, Accessed 31 August 2018.

² Ancestry, Birth Record for Robert Parry, 'England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives, Kew, Surrey, England, Accessed 13 August 2018

³ Extracts from the Minutes of Wesleyan Methodist Conference, Conference Office, London, 1806-1851.

Robert attended Kingswood boarding school, shown in figure 2, from 1831 to 1837.⁴ Fortunately John Wesley, the founder of the Wesleyan Church, had acknowledged the consequences to education for the children of his constantly moving preachers and established Kingswood School in 1748.⁵ The school was to provide continuity of education and be “capable of imparting a sound knowledge on all subjects”.⁶ Described as monastic in style, the students studied eight hours a day, six days a week. Robert studied subjects including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, mathematics, philosophy, chronology, metaphysics, rhetoric and ethics.⁷



Figure 2: Virginia Knight, *Kingswood School Chapel*, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kingswood_School_Chapel.jpg, Accessed 14 Sep 2018.

By 1841 Robert was living with his family in Brecon, Wales working as a draper.⁸ A draper was a merchant, trader or financier of cloth used for clothing.⁹ With the rise of consumerism in the lower classes in the 18th and 19th centuries many drapers established readymade clothing and haberdashery shops.¹⁰ Ten years later Robert exchanged the security of a settled life for the freedom and flexibility of an adventurer when he moved east to Norfolk where he worked for Joseph Kerkham as a draper’s assistant.¹¹ The life of draper’s assistant was disciplined and arduous, shop hours were not regulated and often traded from 9am to 11pm.¹²

⁴ Hastling, A.H.L. Addington Willis, W. and Workman, W.P., *The History of Kingswood School*, Charles H Kelly, Paternoster Row, London 1898, Internet Archive, digital copy, Location 6591

⁵ Thomas Jackson, *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, Wesley Conference Office, London, 1865.

⁶ Hastling, Addington and Workman, Kingswood School, Location 120

⁷ Hastling, Addington and Workman, Kingswood School, Location 344.

⁸ Findmypast, Census Record for Robert Parry, 1841 Census England, Wales & Scotland, Lion Street, St John, St Mary, Brecon, Brecknockshire, Accessed 21 August 2018.

⁹ Familysearch, “England Mercantile Occupations”, Drapers, Accessed 21 August 2018.

¹⁰ Toplis, Alison, “The Clothing Trade in Provincial England, 1800–1850”, Pickering & Chatto, London, 2011, p.44-63, Kindle eBook.

¹¹ Findmypast, Census Record for Robert Parry, “1851 Census England, Wales & Scotland, 82 High Street, Saint Margaret, Kings Lynn, Norfolk”, Accessed 22 August 2018.

¹² *The Late-hour System, a Full Report of the Speeches Delivered at a Meeting of the Metropolitan Drapers’ Association*, London, 1844, *The Making Of The Modern World*, online database, accessed 19 September 2018.

On the 15 November 1851 Robert boarded the *William Prowse* and set sail for New South Wales.¹³ When Robert arrived in Sydney in 1852 little evidence remained of the local indigenous people or the penal settlement that had devastated them.¹⁴ With the discovery of gold in NSW came a boom in retailing and a growing “good middle-class society”.¹⁵ Department stores developed as successful drapers expanded their haberdashery and clothing lines to include other household merchandise. Robert and John Trenchard Smith opened a Drapery and Fancy Goods shop at 96 Pitt Street, Sydney next door to the Royal Victoria Theatre.¹⁶ After John Smith retired in 1855, Robert formed a partnership with another draper, John Halbert.¹⁷ This partnership ended when Robert returned to Wales for a short visit in 1857.¹⁸

Robert met Eliza Jane Toms aboard the *Swiftsure* in 1858 whilst returning to Australia.¹⁹ Six months later Robert and Eliza were married in Melbourne.²⁰ The following year the first of their five children William was born in Sydney.²¹ The family, see figure 3, lived in and around Surry Hills, where terrace houses were being built in a desirable location convenient to the growing town.²² One of the houses Robert rented was 9 Baptist Terrace, Surry Hills described as “containing four rooms, kitchen and bathroom fitted with plunge bath; water laid on”.²³



Figure 3: Photographer Unknown, *Eliza Parry with son William and daughter Sarah*, Sydney, c. 1863, personal collection.

¹³ Ancestry, Shipping Passenger Record for Robert Parry, “New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger List 1826-1922”, New South Wales State Records, Kingswood, Accessed 9 August 2018; “Shipping Intelligence Arrivals”, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 Feb 1852, p.4

¹⁴ Aboriginal Heritage Office, ‘A Brief Aboriginal History’, <http://www.aboriginalheritage.org/history/history/> , Accessed 16 September 2018.

¹⁵ Roger Therry, *Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence in New South Wales and Victoria : With a Supplementary Chapter on Transportation and the Ticket-of-leave System*, Sampson Low, Son and Co, London, 1863, p.p. 60-66.

¹⁶ ‘Advertising’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 1855, p.8.

¹⁷ ‘Advertising’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 1855, p.3.

¹⁸ ‘Advertising’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1857, p.5.

¹⁹ Ancestry, Shipping Records for Robert Parry and Eliza Jane Toms, ‘Victoria, Australia, Assisted and Unassisted Passenger Lists, 1839-1923’, Inward Overseas Passenger Lists, Public Record Office Victoria, North Melbourne, Victoria, Accessed 27 August 2018.

²⁰ Marriage Certificate of Robert Parry and Eliza Jane Toms, married 14 April 1859, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Victoria, 1859/1497.

²¹ Birth Certificate of William Evan Parry, born 30 September 1860, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 1860/2078.

²² Garry Wotherspoon, Chris Keating, Surry Hills, Dictionary of Sydney, 2009, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/surry_hills, viewed 20 Sep 2018: *Sands Sydney Directory*, 302 George Street, Sydney, various editions, 1866, p.300; 1867, p.346; 1870, p.228.

²³ Robert Parry, Insolvency File, Sequestration, 12 June 1865, Container 2/9150, File 7163, State Archives, Kingswood, New South Wales: ‘Advertising’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1865, p.1.

Possibly due to the added responsibility of a family, rather than establishing his own business Robert returned to his role of a draper's assistant in department stores such as Giles and Company.²⁴ Well-educated and experienced draper's assistants were sought-after for the new elegant department stores, which were judged by the manner of their staff. The working conditions for the draper's assistant would not improve for many decades however and continued to impact on their health. "A young man may stand it for about 10 years, but it will eventually make the strongest man unfit for work - it very nearly killed me", George Craib, Bourke Street draper.²⁵



Figure 4: F W Robinson, *Dress Fabric Department, Farmer & Co., 1865*, 37.8 x 47.7 cm., on card 40.4 x 50.3 cm., albumen, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, digital image, Accessed 16 September 2018.

It was while working for Farmers and Company, shown in figure 4, that disaster struck in June 1865. After months of severe illness and being unable to work Robert declared insolvent²⁶. His debt was made up of household living expenses including food, rent, medical bills and personal loans totaling £120 while his only assets, furniture and wearing apparel, totalled £30.²⁷ Tragically six months later his infant daughter Caroline died from debility.²⁸ The following year Robert applied for a position as a Teacher in a National School, his old partner John Halbert providing a character reference.²⁹ No evidence has been found however that he worked as a teacher. In 1871 his youngest daughter Dora Sophie died from diphtheria just before her second birthday.³⁰

²⁴ 'Sydney General Sessions', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 September 1862, p.5.

²⁵ State Library of Victoria, Explore History, *Shop Working Conditions*, <https://tinyurl.com/yb5w69by>, Accessed 19 September 2018.

²⁶ Robert Parry, Insolvency file.

²⁷ Robert Parry, Insolvency File.

²⁸ Burial of Caroline Elizabeth Parry, buried 18 December 1865, Camperdown Cemetery Burial Butts, Sydney Diocesan Archives, Society of Australian Genealogists Library, Sydney, Reel 3234.

²⁹ Teachers Application for Robert Parry, Council of Education, Training School Applications, 1867-1874, Series NRS 2625, 1/764, State Archives, Kingswood, New South Wales.

³⁰ Death Certificate for Dora Sophie Parry, died 6 June 1871, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 2165/1871.

Robert had four admissions to Liverpool Asylum between 1876 and 1878.³¹ At that time the hospital wing of Liverpool Asylum was being used as a convalescent hospital for Sydney Infirmary.³² The 1873 Royal Commission into Public Charities, primarily Sydney Infirmary, had so far failed to address the insufficient hospital accommodation in the growing city.³³ Conditions at Liverpool Asylum were described as overcrowded and inadequately staffed.³⁴ Robert died at his home in Paddington from exhaustion due to congestion of the lungs on 15 August 1882 and is buried at Rookwood Cemetery.³⁵

Robert's character was shaped in his early life, first at home and then at Kingswood. His declaration when he became insolvent due to ill health showed his sense of integrity, "I shall be very happy to pay all my debt if time was allowed one to do so."³⁶ He twice travelled around the world to seek out new countries, embrace strangers and form lasting friendships. His legacy was his sense of independence and tenacity he handed down to his descendants.

³¹ Asylum Records for Robert Parry, Liverpool Asylum for the Infirm and Destitute (1862-1933), Registers of Admissions and Discharges, Reel 1398, State Archives, Kingswood, New South Wales.

³² 'Government Asylums', Sydney Morning Herald, 21 November 1877, p.5

³³ 'Public Charities', The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser, 7 Jul 1877, p.24: Ronald William Rathbone, *A very present help: caring for Australians since 1813 : the history of the Benevolent Society of New South Wales*, State Library of N.S.W. Press, Sydney, 1994. p. 75-77.

³⁴ Liverpool State Hospital, Memos and Letters Sent, 1873-1882, 7/5294, State Archives, Kingswood, New South Wales: 'Liverpool Asylum', Sydney Morning Herald, 28 June 1877, p.7.

³⁵ Death Certificate of Robert Parry, died 15 August 1882, Register of Birth, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 4116/1882.

³⁶ Robert Parry, Insolvency File.

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