

JAMES BARNET - NEW SOUTH WALES COLONIAL ARCHITECT (1865-1890)

'an underpaid officer of the Government'.

by

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## Abbreviations

<i>ABCN</i>	<i>Australasian Builders and Contractors' News</i>
<i>ADB</i>	<i>Australian Dictionary of Biography</i>
AO	Archives Office
<i>B&amp;EJ</i>	<i>Building and Engineering Journal</i>
BFP	Barnet Family Papers
CAOR	Colonial Architect's Office Records
Col Arch	Colonial Architect
Col Sec	Colonial Secretary
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>DT</i>	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>
<i>GG</i>	<i>Government Gazette</i>
<i>HRA</i>	<i>Historical Records of Australia</i>
<i>ISN</i>	<i>Illustrated Sydney News</i>
<i>JRAHS</i>	<i>Journal, Royal Australian Historical Society</i>
LA	Legislative Assembly
LC	Legislative Council
ML	Mitchell Library
NSW	New South Wales
<i>PD</i>	<i>Parliamentary Debates</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
PWD	Public Works Department
<i>SMH</i>	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
<i>T&amp;CJ</i>	<i>Australasian Town and Country Journal</i>
<i>V&amp;P</i>	<i>Votes and Proceedings</i>

## INTRODUCTION

In this study an examination is made of the public career of James Barnet, architect who, after training in London, migrated to Sydney in 1854. He joined the Colonial Architect's Office in 1860 and on 31 October 1862 he was directed to act in the position of Colonial Architect of New South Wales; on 1 January 1865 he was appointed to that position which he occupied until 30 June 1890. The staff of the Office, acting under his general direction, prepared plans for and supervised the construction of more buildings than any other architect in practice in Sydney during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, he achieved more than any other occupant of the position and was probably exceeded only by E.H. Farmer who was Government Architect of New South Wales during 1958-1973.

My emphasis has been placed upon Barnet's work as a nineteenth century civil servant rather than upon his achievements as an architect. Barnet can be shown to have been a competent administrator who satisfied H.C. Coombs' criteria that such a person was one who 'made possible the achievement of other people's dreams'.<sup>1</sup> The argument is also advanced that it was the senior civil servants, rather than the politicians, who made a continuing and lasting contribution to the development of New South Wales during a period of rapid ministerial

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1. H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance*, Melbourne, 1981, p.254-55.

and parliamentary changes. Those changes created many problems because of the close involvement of ministers in the minutia of their departments; problems which were exacerbated when a minister was politically inept or administratively incompetent. Furthermore, frequent changes also meant that the senior civil servants were often expected to shift direction without warning and react favourably to the whims and wishes of yet another minister. Barnet experienced such problems.

From this central theme, that is, Barnet's role as a civil servant, grows another theme in this study; the tension between the demands of the civil servant and the professional architect. As a civil servant, Barnet might have settled for buildings in which utility took precedence over architectural merit. He had, however, trained and practiced for a short time as an architect and, in reaching decisions as Colonial Architect on matters of design he usually preferred to pursue architectural merit rather than utility and economy. Unlike a number of his contemporaries such as John Rae or Critchett Walker, he had not spent the whole of his working life in the civil service so that he was not a career civil servant in the same sense as those officers; for that reason, he tended to react adversely to unwarranted criticism which men more experienced in the practices of the civil service might have dismissed. Thus, he sometimes experienced difficulty in reconciling the demands of his profession with his responsibilities as a civil servant. For example, his wish to erect buildings which, in a particular locality, might be thought to be substantial and expensive was evidence, in part,

of the influences of his professional training on his decisions. His early training and experience cannot then be ignored.

The study begins with an outline of Barnet's professional training, the influences which were likely to have moulded his interpretation of architectural forms and the first ten years of his work in New South Wales. Chapter 2 outlines Barnet's working within the strictures of the civil service especially in the Office of the Colonial Architect. In Chapter 3 an examination is made of the central dilemma which he constantly faced; a dilemma arising from his dual role of architect and civil servant which is explored through a study of a number of buildings for which the Colonial Architect's Office was responsible. This is followed, in Chapter 4, by a study of the question of artistic merit as interpreted by a colonial society in respect of architecture and which formed the grounds for judgement of his work. Many of the problems examined centre on the demands of politicians upon a conscientious civil servant; those problems are identified in Chapter 5. There were, in addition, other forces which brought influence to bear upon the politicians - for example, the Institute of Architects and private architects who, in Chapter 6 will be shown to have made every effort to undermine Barnet's monopoly of public works. An examination is then made in Chapter 7 of civil service reforms in the 1880's which might have influenced the manner in which the Colonial Architect's Office operated as a part of the civil service and which set the scene for a reform of that Office. Chapter 9 examines Barnet's role in respect of defence works which came to an unhappy conclusion with the 1890 Royal Commission on

Defence Works. The study concludes with an assessment of Barnet's civil service career. This arrangement not only examines Barnet's civil service career but also highlights the many factors which influenced the manner in which he worked as Colonial Architect. At the same time, it emphasises the forces which worked against him for many years and which finally resulted in his being retired from the civil service.

## ii.

Shortly after settling in Sydney, Barnet obtained employment with the eminent architect, Edmund Blacket, formerly Colonial Architect (1849-1854) and from 1854 architect to the Senate of the University of Sydney. In the Mitchell Library, Sydney there is a notebook in which Barnet referred to a number of projects with which he was associated during his early years in Sydney.<sup>2</sup> An appreciation of his career published in the *Australasian Builders and Contractors' News* on 12 April 1890 referred to other works for which he was said to have acted as architect; it has not been possible to complete a list of, or fully confirm, buildings with which he was actually associated.

When examining Barnet's official career, there also arises a problem of identifying those public buildings for which he could be said to have been personally responsible. Evidence supports statements that he was the architect of the College Street wing of the Australian

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2. J. Barnet, Papers, Notes and Reports 1855-1892 (ML MSS 726 Item 2). For a study of Blacket's work see M. Herman, *The Blackets: An Era of Australian Architecture* Sydney, 1963.



Museum, the Sydney General Post Office (and in particular the George Street section), the Redfern and Haslem's Creek mortuary stations and the International Exhibition building. Files of the Colonial Architect's Office show that the numerous other public buildings designed while Barnet was in charge were the work of subordinate staff over whose activities he exercised supervision. The plans and specifications carried his signature as a sign of his approval rather than being a statement that he was personally responsible for their preparation. Nevertheless, there are features common to a number of the buildings of the period which clearly identify them as being 'Barnet buildings'.

## iii.

The Office of the Colonial Architect had its beginning in 1817 when Governor Macquarie appointed the convict, Francis Greenway as 'Civil Architect ... and as an assistant to the Inspector of Public Works'.<sup>3</sup> In 1832, after making a review of the manner in which public works were handled, Governor Bourke established the Colonial Architect's Office. The staff consisted of an architect, a clerk of works, a clerk and a storekeeper who worked in Sydney. At Bathurst there was a clerk of works, clerk storekeeper, and a convict 'at a low Salary'. An overseer was stationed at Newcastle.<sup>4</sup> Ambrose Hallen, formerly Town Surveyor and Architect was appointed to the position of architect -

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3. Macquarie to Earl Bathurst, 4 April 1817, *HRA*, Vol.9, p.353.

4. Bourke to Goderich, 3 April 1832, *Ibid.*, Vol.16, pp.591-92.

that is, the Colonial Architect.<sup>5</sup> When Hallen resigned, Mortimer Lewis was appointed in his place as from 1 January 1835.<sup>6</sup> In appointing an architect to the position, Bourke established a precedent for the future.

Lewis was issued with instructions regarding his duties; he was responsible for the preparation of plans and estimates of expenditure for the design, construction and repair of all public buildings, including churches and parsonages but excluding schools, located in New South Wales. He was expected to inspect and report on all those buildings at regular intervals. Furthermore, he was required to hold all plans and records of expenditure for all works under his care and to maintain inventories of furniture purchased from public funds.<sup>7</sup> Those duties continued to be the responsibility of the Office until 1890 although it did not handle railway buildings and schools and was no longer responsible for church property. Over the years other duties were added from time to time so that the Colonial Architect became responsible for a wide range of matters which bore little relationship to his primary function.

As Colonial Architect Barnett operated, of necessity, in a manner which greatly differed from that of former occupants of the position. He was responsible for a very large number of buildings which were scattered throughout New South Wales. In 1871, for example,

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5. For an examination of Hallen's and Lewis' work see M. Herman, *The Early Australian Architects and Their Work* Sydney, 1954, pp.112-18, 190-206.

6. Bourke to Stanley, 18 October 1834, *HRA*, Vol.17, p.554.

7. Col. Sec. to Engineering and Public Works Officers, January 1835 - Col. Sec. Letters Sent: Surveyor-General (NSW A0 4/3883).

there were 170 towns and villages in the colony having a population of one hundred or more persons; by 1891 that number was in excess of 400.<sup>8</sup> Each centre could boast at least one public building which came under the control of the Colonial Architect. Furthermore, the period during which Barnet was in charge was one in which public funds were available and were invested in public works. Although much of that investment was in the form of railways, roads and bridges, a smaller but adequate provision was made for the construction, extension and maintenance of public buildings.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Barnet was responsible for an ever-increasing number of buildings which were spread over a wide geographical area. In much of this work, for example the design and construction of buildings, he operated in a manner common to the profession but that was only a part, albeit a large part, of the demands made upon his time. As Colonial Architect he became involved in a wide range of matters including colonial defences or the safety of theatres and other places of amusement. He was responsible for the preparation of Annual and Revised Estimates of Expenditure, the drafting of answers to Parliamentary questions; or serving as a trustee of the Australian Museum. From time to time, he was directed to participate in the proceedings of public inquiries either as a witness or a member of the Inquiry. These tasks all demanded administrative rather than architectural skills.

His Office, judged by the standards of the day, was a large and extremely busy architectural practice requiring that professional staff specialise in order to meet the workload; at the same time,

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8. T.A. Coghlan, *Results of a Census of New South Wales, 1891* - Table IX Sydney, 1894.

9. See N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861-1890* Canberra, 1976, pp.291-369.

Barnet found that he was increasingly unable to provide the personal supervision so necessary to safeguard the standards of performance which were necessary. His critics believed that by the mid 1880's, the Office was no longer the most efficient way in which to plan and construct public buildings which they argued should be handed over to private practitioners.

The Colonial Architect's Office did not exist in isolation; it was a branch within the Department of Public Works which, in turn, formed one of a number of loosely-connected Departments of State which formed the New South Wales civil service. That service was bound by traditions and practices which had been transplanted from Britain; after 1856 it began to form traditions and conventions which did not always reflect the reforms slowly taking place in Britain. In New South Wales reforms came slowly; the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms were gradually applied in Britain whereas they made little impact upon the New South Wales civil service. The 1884 *Civil Service Act* was largely ineffective and thorough going reforms waited until 1895; for example, it was only then that a central employing agency, the Public Service Board was established.

iv.

The study of the career of a senior civil servant brings a number of problems. In the first place, one experiences difficulty in identifying those recommendations which that official personally initiated and those submitted for his consideration before being referred to the Under Secretary or Minister. His comments, as

recorded in files, may or may not be a statement of his own opinions; perhaps they reflected his judgment of what was politically acceptable or administratively possible. At the same time, those file notes quite often revealed a great deal about the officer responsible. In this study Barnet will be shown to have expressed himself in his minutes in a way which was quite distinctive; for example, he was both ready and able to defend his opinions and jealously guarded his professional reputation. The twin concepts of 'ministerial responsibility' and 'civil service anonymity' had not been clearly defined in colonial New South Wales so that senior civil servants were often the subject of public criticism while being expected to refrain from involving themselves in controversy. The nature of Barnet's work was such that 'the Colonial Architect' was frequently mentioned in the daily press; rarely did James Barnet attract the same attention.

In this study of Barnet's career, use was made of the extensive records of the New South Wales Archives Office; in particular, those listed in 'Record Group NGA - Government (Colonial) Architect 1837 - c.1970'. The Mitchell Library holds four items of Barnet's papers which were relevant to the study; those papers included a personal diary, some letters and statements of public buildings completed during each year commencing in 1863. The Council of the Municipality of the City of Sydney possesses material relevant to the period during which Barnet was in its employment. Some material is also held in the archives of the University of Sydney; a number of personal papers were held by a grandson, the late Donald McK Barnet of Artarmon (NSW) which were examined while in his possession. Metropolitan and rural newspapers have been a useful source for material relating to

descriptions of buildings, public attitudes towards them and the local politics which so often surrounded decisions to provide such buildings.

My examination of Barnet's career shows that during the years 1865-1890 he worked closely with a number of extremely competent colleagues occupying senior positions in the civil service - for example, Geoffrey Eagar, Secretary to the Treasury (1872-1891); John Rae, a senior official for 36 years and Frederic Norton Manning, Inspector-General of the Insane (1879-1898). The careers of many of those men have been outlined in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Those entries are rarely sufficiently detailed to enable a comparison to be made of the manner in which each official responded to the challenges of the nineteenth century civil service although they show a similar pattern: key departments were controlled for long periods by the one senior official. In the past, the work of senior civil servants and the place of the departments of state in shaping the colony's development had not attracted the attention of historians. Stephen Foster's biography of Edward Deas Thomson, (*Colonial Improver* Melbourne, 1978) is the only detailed study of the career of a nineteenth century New South Wales public administrator to have been published in recent years. Arthur McMartin's *Public Servants and Patronage* (Sydney, 1983) is a study of the New South Wales civil service until the granting of self-government. It suggests a number of themes worthy of detailed study and shows that the civil service mirrored the thrust and parry of colonial politics. A.G. Kingsmill (*Witness to History*, Sydney, 1972) wrote an introductory study of the development and influence of the Colonial Secretary's Department but it was a study which left unanswered more questions than it resolved.

The political environment in which Barnett worked was examined in detail through a number of studies of which Loveday and Martin's seminal work *Parliament Factions and Parties* (Melbourne, 1966) described the manner in which faction politics operated in colonial New South Wales. This was followed in 1967 by a journal article, 'The Political Mastery of Sir Henry Parkes',<sup>10</sup> in which Bede Nairn challenged Loveday and Martin's conclusion that factions had 'provided a considerable degree of cohesion and stability' and, in so doing, set off a debate about the role of the civil service in making the machinery of government operate smoothly. Martin's recent study, *Henry Parkes: A Biography* (Melbourne, 1980) reveals in great detail the manner in which that astute politician manipulated the parliamentary system. Although to some extent superseded by the publication of the four volumes of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* covering the period 1851-1890, Martin and Wardle's pioneering work, *Members of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales 1856-1901* (Canberra, 1959) has been a valuable reference guide. During 1983 this register was revised by C.N. Connolly (*Biographical Register of the New South Wales Parliament 1856-1901*, Canberra, 1983) and extended to include members of the Legislative Council.

Australia's architectural history is also an area of study neglected by historians. The pioneer work of Morton Herman, *The Early Australian Architects* (Sydney, 1954) and *The Architecture of Victorian Sydney* (Sydney, 1956) are useful introductions to the development of architecture in the colony of New South Wales and the contribution made by the principal architects towards that growth

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10. *JRAHS*, Vol.53, 1969, pp.1-51.

during the period 1788-1890. J.M. Freeland's *Architecture in Australia: A History* (Melbourne, 1968) is a more ambitious study but it is not free from factual errors and unsubstantiated assertions and it does not fully relate architecture to wide economic and political developments. His study, *Architect Extraordinary: The Life and Work of John Horbury Hunt 1838-1904* (Melbourne, 1971) provides insights into the attitudes and behaviour of that eccentric genius. M.H. Ellis' *Francis Greenway: His Life and Times* Sydney (2nd edition, 1953) remains the most significant study of the career of a nineteenth century colonial architect. Herman and Freeland were architects who had, almost by chance, become interested in Australian architectural history. Ellis was a journalist who had made a very detailed study of and became immersed in the Macquarie period; his biography of Greenway was a part of that study. Some examination has been made by architect-historians of the work of architects of a later period - for example, Walter Burley Griffin and Leslie Wilkinson - who, although important figures in Australian architectural history, are not relevant to the subject matter of this thesis.

As Professor of Architecture at the University of New South Wales, Freeland encouraged his students to examine the work of a number of the architects of colonial New South Wales. Their reports were generally a faithful record of architectural achievements; they were neither biography nor history.



## v.

Although this thesis is my own work, use has been made of the work of others to provide a background to my study, such use being acknowledged in the usual manner.

I wish to place on record my appreciation of the assistance offered to me by a number of persons and institutions who gave access to material; without their co-operation the preparation of this study would not have been possible. In the first place, the Archives Office of New South Wales is an invaluable repository of a large quantity of material relevant to the study of colonial administrative history; the staff of that Office were generous in their assistance in guiding me through that mass of material. The Mitchell Library holds material such as the Parkes Correspondence and Barnet Papers which were relevant to my study. In addition, the Library holds copies of trade journals as well as reports and proceedings of a large number of nineteenth century professional and trade associations to which the staff drew my attention. Much of my research was carried out in the National Library of Australia where the staff were most patient in handling the requests of a demanding reader.

The Town Clerk, Council of the Municipality of the City of Sydney granted me permission to examine the early records of the Council brought to my notice by the then archivist, Ken Smith who was later to give further assistance as Archivist of the University of Sydney. His predecessor at the University, Gerald Fischer was also most helpful in identifying material held in the archives. The NSW Department of Public Works provided opportunities for me to examine plans, specifications and photographs; opportunities

which, because of the emphasis later given to my study, were of limited relevance. That assistance was, nevertheless, much appreciated.

Peter Reynolds, School of Architecture, University of New South Wales permitted me to examine his doctoral thesis; a study of the development of the Government Architect's Branch of the Public Works Department. Peter Bridges gave me a copy of his unpublished manuscript being a study of the New South Wales Court houses of the Barnet period. Mrs M.E. Hart, Librarian, Ferguson Memorial Library, Sydney; R. Wallace Kirkly, Presbyterian Historical Society; the Singleton and Narrabri Historical Societies and Bruce Penray, CAE, Goulburn (NSW), drew my attention to a number of matters which had escaped my notice.

Acknowledgement is made in a special manner of the interest in this study shown by members of the Barnet Family; in particular, the late Donald Barnet who was a working colleague before I became involved in the study of his grandfather's career and who gave me access to family papers (identified in this study as 'Barnet Family Papers'). I owe a particular debt to my supervisor, Bruce Mitchell who set high standards of scholarship; without his encouragement and guidance this study probably would not have been completed. Anne Clugston, with skill and great patience, brought order to a confused manuscript. My own family were tolerant of Barnet's intrusion into their lives. Nevertheless, I alone accept responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation which may have been recorded.