

An Educational Venture The Bennett Family in England

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On 18 February 1878, the *Parramatta* sailed from Sydney, carrying away to England Agnes Bennett and her seven children. Her husband, William Bennett, Commissioner for Roads and Bridges in New South Wales, stood on the wharf. He wrote several times to his wife about the last glimpse of his family, when she lifted two-year old Harry to the rails. Mr Bennett did not see his children for three and a half years. He was never to see his wife again.

The purpose of the move to England was educational. There were no secondary schools for girls in Sydney and the two older girls, as well as five-year old Agnes, later a well-known Wellington doctor, had been taught by their mother. I presume that the boys had been taught at home, too, when they were small but they had also been to school in Sydney. There is nothing in the correspondence about this except that the travelling had proved a nuisance. The Bennetts lived in Neutral Bay and communications between the North Shore and the city before the ferries operated were poor; Mr Bennett often rowed himself to work.

There are no letters from the period immediately before the family left to tell about the decision-making behind the move. In their biography of Dr Agnes Bennett, who was one of the children, Cecil and Celia Manson wrote, 'Her parents had always planned to have the children educated in England at modern schools',¹ which does not take one very far. But by exploring the lives of the parents, I think I can make the move intelligible.

William Bennett was born in Dublin in 1824, son of a traffic-manager on the Union Canal. After his father's death, he was articled at sixteen as an engineer. He had outstanding abilities and soon outgrew Ireland. After working in South America for some years, he arrived in Sydney. He reached his position of Commissioner and his salary of £1,000 p.a. through great skill as an engineer and as an administrator, and hard work.² He was thirty-nine when he married, fifty-four when the family left, aware that he might die before the children were established in life. He believed that good careers were essential if middle-class standards were to be kept.

Mrs Bennett also had middle-class aspirations and no rich relations. She was born in England but went when young with her family to New York. Her father made a living by tracing pedigrees at the New