

PRINSEP, HENRY CHARLES

Henry Charles Prinsep (HCP) was born in Calcutta in 1844. He was the second son of Charles Robert Prinsep, a member of a distinguished family involved with the East India Company and who had seen service with the Indian Government.

The Prinsep Estate in Western Australia, the principal purpose of which was to supply India with horses, had been established when Thomas Little, as agent for C. R. Prinsep, arrived at Fremantle in 1838 and over the next few years had purchased three properties in the Bunbury district, land at Leschenault which he named Belvidere, land at Dardanup which he named Prinsep Park and Paradise Farm. In 1850 C. R. Prinsep purchased from James Henty a 20,000 acre grant.

After the death in 1855 of his wife Louisa, nee White, followed by his own declining health, C. R. Prinsep left India with his children Charles John, HCP, Annie Mary, Louisa Sophia and Mary Emily and James Charles for England. HCP was educated at Cheltenham College and intending to be trained as an artist, made in due course the artist's journey to Europe and the Dresden Art School.

C. R. Prinsep died in June 1864 and in 1865 the executors of his estate, his brother-in-law Henry White and his brothers Henry Thoby and William decided that the two eldest sons should go to Australia to view and or manage the Prinsep properties, Charles John to Tasmania and HCP to Western Australia. On his arrival in May 1866, HCP, confronted with a situation for which he had no training remained undecided for some months as to whether to stay in Western Australia, but on being introduced to the Bussell family at Cattle Chosen and meeting Charlotte Josephine, the youngest daughter, the decision was made and he and Josephine were married in February 1868.

In the economic climate of late 1860's and early 1870's the management of the Prinsep Estate presented HCP with many problems which were compounded by a disastrous voyage to India with horses in 1870 which ended in the vessel running aground resulting in a total loss, the cargo not having been insured due to a misunderstanding. HCP extended the Prinsep interest in one important direction, the supply of timber sleepers for the rapidly expanding Indian railway system. Financial difficulties finally forced the sale of The Prinsep Estate, leaving HCP free of debt and in a position to take up employment in 1874 as a draughtsman in the Department of Lands and Surveys in Perth, soon to be joined by Josephine and their first daughter Carlotta who had been born in June 1869. HCP rose to the position of Chief Clerk and in January 1894 was appointed head of the newly established Mines Department. Two more daughters were born, Emily in 1875 and Virginia in 1880.

In Perth HCP enjoyed a large range of interests including painting, sketching, writing, poetry and theatre stage design. His principal home was "The Studio" in Hay Street. "The Chine" at Mosman Park was the family's holiday house. He cultivated a wide circle of friends among the leading families, the State Governors, the Burts, Sir John Forrest, the Leakes, Onslows, Barlees and Herbert W. Gibbs, father of May Gibbs.

On 1 January 1894 HCP was appointed Under-Secretary for Mines where he remained until 1898 when in May of that year he was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines. In 1907 he applied for a

year's leave on health grounds and in May with Josephine and daughter Emily left for a visit to England and Europe. Whilst there he provided information to Lord Elgin's enquiry into neck-chaining of aboriginal prisoners. On their return in September 1908 he retired from Government service and moved to Busselton where he commenced the building of "Little Holland House". In retirement he served for some years as Mayor of Busselton and often conducted services at St. Mary's Church. The year 1918 saw the couple celebrate their golden wedding. In 1922 he fell into his last short illness and died in July of that year. Josephine lived on at Little Holland House with their unmarried daughter Emily, dying in December 1929, Carlotta had married Edward Reveley Brockman's son Peter (Pierre) in 1901. Virginia had married Thomas Reynolds in 1907.

For sources and further details see "The Prinsep Estate in Western Australia" and "Henry Charles Prinsep" by A.C. Staples in "Early Days" the Journal of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. Vol. 5, Part 1, pages 16-30 and 31-52. 'Travel and Adventures in Colonial Western Australia' by Malcolm Allbrook. National Library of Australia News, December 2006.

Compiled by Patrick Bunbury, 2009