



**Coping as a Teacher in the Outback in New South Wales,
1880-1900: John Ainsworth – A Case Study.**

John Ainsworth

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ABSTRACT

Historical biography offers a unique perspective on social change, by viewing developments over time through the experience of a particular individual. Thus, a biographical case study provides an insight into how such an individual may have effected, and been affected by change in his or her own environment or society. The case study for this paper is my great-grandfather, John Ainsworth (1849-1919), who had a long career as a teacher with the Department of Public Instruction in New South Wales. John Ainsworth emigrated from England to Australia in 1869, settling initially at Lambton, near Newcastle in New South Wales, where he found work as a miner with the Scottish-Australian Coal Company. Ten years later, having married and begun to raise a young family on a coal miner's meagre income, he decided on a fundamental career change and took a six-month teacher training program with the Department of Public Instruction. After graduation, he embarked on a teaching career with the department that, from 1880 to 1900, would see him posted as school master to remote locations in the outback west of Inverell (5 years), Singleton (7 years) and then Orange (8 years). The focus of this paper is on how he managed to cope as a school master in such remote locations where:

- the climate was often quite harsh;
- the residential accommodation provided by the department for his growing young family was invariably inadequate; and
- the facilities available for teaching and learning were only very basic at best.

The paper also considers how he did so despite official indifference, and even hostility, towards any of the proposals or other initiatives taken on his part to remedy or improve the difficult situation as outlined above.

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John Ainsworth came to Australia from Lancashire in 1869. Times were hard then for ordinary working class people striving to make a living for themselves and their families in England. While the times were hard in Australia too, this was a land of opportunity for anyone with the vision and determination to have a go at improving their lot in life. And John, as we shall see, was just such a person. Settling initially in Lambton, another colliery town in proximity to Newcastle, the 20 year-old Englishman took a job as a miner with the Scottish-Australian Coal Company. It was here that he met Sarah, the daughter of a fellow miner, George McKean, and after a brief courtship they were married in 1874.

The newly-weds made their home at New Lambton, where John continued working with the same mining company while Sarah settled in to married life and prepared for the birth of the first of their fourteen children. Here their eldest son William (Will) was born in 1875, followed the next year by a daughter named Sarah (known to the family as Dolly, to avoid confusion with her mother). Then a year or so later, with the birth of a third child pending, the family moved to Charlestown, where John found them more suitable accommodation and employment for himself as a mine manager at the Waratah Company's colliery.

After George's birth in 1878, however, and with responsibility for a growing young family weighing heavily upon him, John decided upon a more fundamental career change. So in July 1879, at the age of 29 years, he began a six-month teacher training program with the Department of Public Instruction. On completion of this program, he started work immediately as a temporary teacher at the nearby Wickham Public School, earning £8 a month for his efforts. John continued in this capacity until 30 April 1880, when he accepted the department's offer of permanent appointment as a teacher at the Rob Roy Public School, located in a small farming community about five miles west of Inverell in northern New South Wales. Leaving his wife and three children to stay in Newcastle with her parents for the time being - Sarah was expecting the birth of their fourth child in the very near future - John made the long journey to Rob Roy alone early in May 1880 to start work in this teaching post. A few days later, on 13 May, Sarah gave birth at her parents' home to a son named John who, sadly, died within a week as a result of contracting tetanus. Thus it was not until near the end of July, when she had recovered

sufficiently from the effects of this traumatic experience, that Sarah took herself and the other children to join her school master husband in their new home at Rob Roy.

All we know of the family's experience during the three years and more they spent at Rob Roy is that Sarah gave birth to another two children – Bertha in 1881 and Florence in 1883 - while John performed his duties as a teacher sufficiently well to rate promotion to a 3A classification (up from 3C on appointment in April 1880) in his final year of service there. When they eventually left Rob Roy in September 1883 on transfer to a new school being opened by the department further to the west of Inverell in the farming district of Gum Flat, the Ainsworths had only a relatively short distance to travel, but required the assistance of horse and bullock teams respectively to convey them and their belongings along almost five miles of bush track leading to their destination.

John was to be school master at Gum Flat for about 20 months, during which he successfully supported an application from local residents for evening classes to be provided for the young men of the district, many of whom had to work during the day, and accepted the additional workload that this would entail for him in a single-teacher school. He also won promotion again, firstly to a 2B classification and then finally to 2A, showing that his level of skill as a teacher was steadily improving. Sarah too played a role at the school, teaching needlework to the girls as part of her duties as the school master's wife. Otherwise, she managed the family's domestic affairs with a character-istically firm hand and contributed to its growth at Gum Flat by giving birth to their seventh child, another son named John (Jack), in September 1884. By this time, though, the harsh climate of the region around Inverell had become a factor detrimental to Sarah's health. Every winter she suffered the effects of dysentery so severely that, according to John, he 'was repeatedly advised by Doctors Segal & Knowles to seek removal to a warmer climate, as Mrs Ainsworth's constitution would not stand the rigor of the winters.'¹ Consequently, he sought a transfer from Gum Flat to a school in a region with a more temperate climate, which culminated in a move for the family to Jerry's Plains, about 20 miles west of Singleton, in July 1885.

¹ Letter of 7-5-92 from John Ainsworth, Principal Teacher, Lucknow Public School, to J.C. Maynard, Chief Inspector, Sydney, in Lucknow Public School File, 1878-1921 (Bundle A), New South Wales State Records [hereafter NSWRSR] Item 5/16666. See also medical certificate from Nick Read, M.B., dated Singleton 30 May 1892, in *ibid.*

Jerry's Plains would be home to the Ainsworths for about the next seven years. They moved there hoping to experience a change for the better but discovered on arrival, much to their dismay, that the modest, two-bedroom school master's residence was hardly adequate for a family of two adults and six children. Furthermore, it had 'no firegrate or oven, or any other means of cooking....'² And there were problems too in endeavouring to utilize space adjacent to the residence for domestic purposes, such as gardening, storage and the like, 'owing to the number of pigs and dogs that roam about and which render it unsafe to leave the kitchen door open.'³ John responded to his family's immediate need for cooking facilities in their new home by promptly purchasing a colonial oven himself and then seeking reimbursement from the department. A year or so later, he also managed to persuade the department to supply materials for a fence to enclose a garden that he had begun to cultivate on land beside the residence. But he was never able to convince departmental officials of the need to expand the school residence to a more appropriate size, even though his family continued to grow whilst at Jerry's Plains with the birth of another son, Harrison (Harry), in 1886, followed by three daughters – Daisy, Ada and Essie - respectively in 1888, 1890 and 1892. The rationale for refusing his quite reasonable request for more living space was articulated by the local school inspector, Mr. Flashman, who maintained that any addition to the residence 'would not look very well' or be cost effective should 'a teacher with a smaller family' replace John in the future and, in any event, 'the present accommodation is on the whole of a superior character.'⁴ The department's acceptance of this dubious assessment of the situation probably had more to do with officialdom's unfavourable perception of John personally than with the obvious merits of the case, given that his successor as school master at Jerry's Plains in 1892, Mr. John Gillespie – a teacher with a smaller family – actually received permission subsequently from these same officials for a detached laundry, bathroom and pantry to be built behind the residence.

² *Jerry's Plains Public School/1881-1981* (Jerry's Plains, 1981), p.8. Held at Singleton Public Library.

³ Letter of 19-7-86 from John Ainsworth, Public School Jerry's Plains, to C.O. Flashman, Inspector, Muswellbrook, in Jerry's Plains Public School File NSWSR Item 5/16387.

⁴ Commentary dated 20-2-88 from C.O. Flashman to District Inspector, T. Dwyer, on reverse side of 'Application for Addition to Residence' dated 11-2-88 from John Ainsworth, Public School Jerry's Plains, to C.O. Flashman, Inspector, Muswellbrook, in *ibid*.

In his previous postings at schools in the Inverell district, John had been generally well regarded by departmental officials, who reported favourably on his performance as a school master and supported his promotion within the teaching profession. But not long after his transfer to Jerry's Plains, he found himself in a battle with officialdom that was to continue for the rest of his teaching career, gain him a reputation in official departmental circles as a trouble-maker, keep him in 'the back country', as he called it, for many years to come and lead ultimately, in January 1900, to his demotion to a 2B classification.⁵ This process of John being redefined negatively in official terms seems to have begun in November 1886, when he applied to the department for permission to sit the examination for promotion to a level 1 classification. In opposing this application, Flashman reported to the District Inspector that 'Mr. Ainsworth does not possess any but ordinary, uncultivated professional skill [and] ... has not yet advanced sufficiently to realise that teaching is something more than a money getting occupation....'⁶ With other, more senior officials of the department endorsing the observations in this report, John's career prospects were looking anything but promising. The situation worsened thereafter as a consequence of uncomplimentary annual school inspection reports submitted by Flashman, reaching a crisis point in November 1888 via a particularly damning report which concluded that the children under John's care at the Jerry's Plains Public School were behaving badly and performing poorly, while 'the teacher is not alive to the fact that his labor (sic) is comparatively unproductive.'⁷ John replied vigorously to this attack on his professional reputation, insisting that the situation was actually quite to the contrary and arguing his case in the following terms:

When I took charge of this school it was a 7th Class [institution] averaging 43. The highest class was a third [grade], which a few days previously had gained the mark "Tolerable". Now, the average for this quarter, thus far, is over 60. I have a fourth [grade] class working Euclid, Algebra, Latin and Mensuration; and, when I consider, that this has been done among boys ranging from 17 years of age downwards, some of whom go on the roads for 3 weeks and sometimes 3 months at a time driving cattle and

⁵ Letter of 25-1-90 from John Ainsworth, Public School Jerry's Plains, to J.C. Maynard, Chief Inspector, Sydney, in Jerry's Plains Public School File, NSWSR Item 5/16387; NSWSR Teachers' Roll No.1, p.188.

⁶ Handwritten note dated 11-11-86 from Flashman to District Inspector, Jerry's Plains Public School File, NSWSR Item 5/16387.

⁷ Letter of 26-11-88 from John Ainsworth, Public School Jerry's Plains, to J.C. Maynard, Chief Inspector, Sydney, in *ibid*.

sheep and consequently mixing with all kinds of men, and then come to school again to mix with a lot of boys, and that this has been done without one appeal, either from me, or the parents of the pupils to my Superior Officers, I must respectfully confess, that I am not alive to the fact that my labor is unproductive.⁸

The department rejected his argument, however, preferring instead to accept Flashman's advice that 'Mr Ainsworth ... will never make a result producing class teacher', actually 'has little real interest in his work', and should 'be informed that unless the school is found in a much better state of efficiency at the next inspection the question of reducing his classification will be considered.'⁹

After receiving formal notification in this regard from the department in January 1889, John was desperate to find a way to improve his career prospects, as well as the plight of his family to which the department remained indifferent. Accordingly, citing both family and professional reasons, he applied several times to be transferred to a higher class school in another district and, in January 1890, specifically nominated the Newcastle area where his parents-in-law still resided and his eldest son, Will, had recently found employment with the Railway Department.¹⁰ The transfer arranged for him by his own department in March 1891, however, was an appointment to a school at Black Mountain, a remote location near Guyra in the north of the state, which John immediately rejected as unacceptable. With support from the local member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, John appealed to the Minister against this ridiculous decision, but won only a partial victory conditional on him either accepting transfer to another school of the department's choice after mid-winter, or remaining at Jerry's Plains at a reduced classification. When the time came for him to make a decision in this regard later in 1891, he rejected the department's offer of transfer to Wentworth – far to the south-west, on the border with Victoria, and about 20 miles west of Mildura - and thus faced the prospect of having to accept a reduction in classification¹¹.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Memo dated 18-12-88 from C.O. Flashman, Muswellbrook, to District Inspector, T. Dwyer, in *ibid.*

¹⁰ Letter of 25-1-90 from John Ainsworth, Public School Jerry's Plains, to J.C. Maynard, Chief Inspector, Sydney, in *ibid.*

¹¹ Typescript note 'Lucknow Public School: Application from Teacher, Mr Ainsworth, for exemption of his wife from duty under Regulation 96', dated 27-4-92, in Lucknow Public School File, 1878-1921 (Bundle A), NSWSR Item 5/16666.

These two transfer options suggest a definite motive on the department's part to encourage John to leave teaching for some other occupation, so patently unattractive were the locations of the teaching posts offered to him. John actually had considered the possibility of a such a career change himself a few years earlier but, after giving some thought to resigning from the department and buying into one of the two public houses at Jerry's Plains, he decided not to proceed with the idea. Now, in more desperate circumstances, he took the opportunity to purchase a local store which his wife managed along with her regular household duties, albeit with assistance from Dolly and the elder children, while John carried on in the role of school master for the time being at least. The acquisition of this business certainly relieved the family's accommodation difficulties to some extent and offered John the prospect of a permanent career change in due course. But, by his own estimate, it would have required at least twelve months to become financially viable and the department, of course, was not prepared to wait that long for him to decide whether to stay on in the teaching profession or to leave.¹² Accordingly, on 12 January 1892, he received instructions from the department to move on transfer to the public school at Lucknow, near Orange. While he procrastinated about what to do in response, the department appointed his replacement as school master at Jerry's Plains and then left him with the choice of either taking the position on offer or submitting his resignation. With the greatest reluctance and under protest, he accepted the former and departed for Lucknow a few days later, arriving there in time to open the school on Wednesday, 20 January.

But any departmental officials who thought they may finally have won the day and put the troublesome John Ainsworth in his place were in for a surprise. Indeed, hostilities between the new school master and the bureaucracy governing his teaching career would quickly be renewed and actually intensify over the eight year period of his tenure at the Lucknow Public School. They began with John arriving at Lucknow alone and promptly engaging a local woman, Mrs Williams, as sewing mistress at the school in place of his wife, Sarah, who had remained at Jerry's Plains with the children. When the District Inspector at Bathurst, Mr. J. Mc Credie, learned of this situation late in March 1892, he immediately wrote to John for an explanation. This resulted in John applying formally to

¹² Letter dated 25-5-92 from James Torpy, Orange, to the Minister for Public Instruction, Sydney, in *ibid.*

McCredie for leave of absence from school duties to be granted to Sarah ‘during the whole of the time it may be the pleasure of the Department to keep me in a school situated on the [Central] Tablelands...’¹³ He did so on the basis of the severity of the climate at Lucknow, the delicate state of his wife’s health after having only recently given birth to Essie, as well as his own inability to meet the considerable cost of transporting his family by coach and rail, via Sydney and Orange, to Lucknow. McCredie was not favourably impressed by this argument, however, and recommended refusal of the application for leave and ‘that Mr. Ainsworth be removed as early as practicable to another school.’¹⁴ This is precisely the reaction John wanted, of course, though he was not to get his way on this occasion. The Chief Inspector in Sydney, Mr. J.C. Maynard, accepted some aspects of the argument presented in John’s application and won approval from the Minister for the temporary employment of Mrs Williams until 30 April, when it was expected Sarah should be fit to take up her duties as sewing mistress at Lucknow. John tried to fight this decision, informing Maynard that any attempt to compel Sarah to bring herself and ten children – including a two-week old infant - on the long, arduous journey to Lucknow before the end of winter ‘would place her life in jeopardy.’ He appealed for her to be granted leave ‘to remain at Jerry’s Plains, till this winter is over’ and, also, for his employment of Mrs Williams in the meantime to be sanctioned, ‘as she is an excellent needlewoman and manages the girls very well.’¹⁵ But the department was not prepared to make an exception to the rule in this case, even if the circumstances seemed to warrant it, because to do so ‘would be to establish a most dangerous precedent.’¹⁶ John was compelled to accept this decision after having his salary reduced from the married to single teacher rate in June 1892, a situation he had to bear until Sarah and the children finally joined him at Lucknow in September. The only concession that he did receive in this time was reimbursement of the £2 it cost him to continue employing

¹³ Letter of 2-4-92 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, to J. McCredie, District Inspector, Bathurst, in *ibid.*

¹⁴ Commentary dated 4-4-92 from J. McCredie to Chief Inspector, Sydney, on reverse side of *ibid.*

¹⁵ Letter of 7-5-92 from John Ainsworth, Principal Teacher, Public School Lucknow, to J.C. Maynard, Chief Inspector, Sydney, in *ibid.*

¹⁶ Typescript note ‘Lucknow Public School: Application from Teacher, Mr Ainsworth, for exemption of his wife from duty under Regulation 96’, dated 27-4-92’, in *ibid.*

Mrs Williams as sewing mistress until the end of July.¹⁷ So try as they might to avoid it, the Ainsworths finally had to bow to the inevitable and make Lucknow their home for the foreseeable future.

Familiar problems immediately became apparent with their accommodation in the school master's residence which, while having an additional bedroom and being of slightly larger dimension than their previous home at Jerry's Plains, was still more than a little cramped for a family of two adults and ten children. And this situation would be exacerbated when the family grew even larger with the birth of Muriel, Minnie and Thomas, respectively in 1894, 1896 and 1898. The cooking facilities in the residence also left a lot to be desired, though John eventually remedied this situation himself by building a brick oven in the kitchen because, as he told McCredie, 'the small "Mistress Stove" is almost useless and totally inadequate to the requirements of a family like mine, twelve in number.'¹⁸ When he attempted to claim reimbursement of the cost of the bricks and cement that he had used for this purpose, however, the department accepted McCredie's advice on the matter and refused to pay.

In his role as school master at Lucknow, John's working relationship with District Inspector McCredie was anything but positive and, ultimately, detrimental to his career prospects. From the outset, McCredie seemed antagonistic towards John, criticising his performance and opposing, almost as a matter of course, initiatives on his part to raise funds and effect improvements in conditions and facilities at the school. This was hardly surprising, of course, given the initial negative impression John had made on the district inspector over matters relating to the sewing mistress affair. Yet even the department recognised McCredie's predisposition as excessive on occasion, an example being in May 1896, when he recommended refusal of John's request to stage a fund-raising school musical on the grounds 'that no teacher who does not secure a favourable report upon the inspection of his school should be allowed to get up an entertainment by the pupils for a

¹⁷ 'Application for Refund of money expended in teaching sewing' dated 12-7-92 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, to E. Johnson, Under-Secretary, Department of Public Instruction, Sydney, in *ibid*.

¹⁸ 'Application for Refund of Money Expended' dated 2-10-93 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, to J. McCredie, District Inspector, Bathurst, in *ibid*.

prize fund.’ Sensibly, the chief inspector over-ruled his subordinate in this instance, noting: ‘The entertainment is a harmless one and the object of it good.’¹⁹

McCredie also opposed requests in June 1892, and again in June 1894, for a female assistant teacher to be appointed to replace pupil teacher, Mr. G.E. Thomas, at Lucknow even though, as John pointed out in his submissions, the growth in enrolments to 107 and 199 students respectively – the majority of whom were female students – required the appointment of an assistant, in accordance with departmental regulations, to support the school master and lessen his burden in teaching and teacher supervision.²⁰ With respect to the 1894 submission, the department rejected the district inspector’s recommendation and, as per the school master’s request, arranged subsequently for the appointment of a female assistant teacher as a replacement for Mr. Thomas. McCredie’s response to the earlier submission of 1892, though, which proposed appointing an additional pupil teacher rather than an assistant should the school’s enrolment increase by a further 15%, actually opened the way for John to employ his 14 year old son, George, as a pupil teacher at the Lucknow Public School. This initiative, which McCredie himself formally recommended to the department in April 1893, seems to have come about because there were no other candidates available to meet the school’s need in this regard and, as a consequence, the district inspector had no other choice.²¹

Such victories over officialdom were few and far between for John, however, and the accumulation of negative annual inspection reports on his teaching performance in 1896, 1897 and 1899 eventually prevailed against him. John disputed the bases of the criticisms made against him by the district inspector, explaining that lengthy absences by members of his teaching staff on enforced leave of absence or teaching relief duties in Orange, as well as overcrowding in the class rooms, had made it difficult for him at times to ensure ‘the proper organization of the School.’ McCredie confirmed the existence of problems of the nature claimed by John in his defence, but insisted ‘that these facts do not exonerate

¹⁹ Commentary dated 20-5-96 from J. McCredie to Chief Inspector, Sydney, and 26-5-96 from F. Bridges to Under Secretary, J.C. Maynard, at the foot of letter of application ‘Re Permission for Entertainment’ dated 14-5-96 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, in *ibid*.

²⁰ ‘Application for Female Assistant’ dated 25-6-92 and ‘Application for Increases of Staff’ dated 25-6-94 from John Ainsworth, Principal Teacher, Public School Lucknow, to J. McCredie, District Inspector, Bathurst, in *ibid*.

²¹ Memo dated 24-4-93 from J. McCredie, District Inspector, Bathurst, to Chief Inspector, in *ibid*.

him from blame....²² His insistence in this regard, however, ignored the fact that enrolments at the Lucknow Public School had risen substantially over the years, and more than doubled – from 107 to 219 students – in the first three years of John’s tenure as school master there. And yet, apart from upgrading the hat-storage and lavatory facilities at the school which, much to McCredie’s annoyance, John actually did himself and then claimed reimbursement of the material costs ‘to save expense and to avoid the inconvenience of having some-one hammering in the hat-room during school hours’, nothing seems to have been done by the department to provide additional class-room space for these students and their teachers at Lucknow or, alternatively, to reassign some of the students to other schools in the region.²³

Even the tragic death from meningitis of the infant, Thomas Ainsworth, just a few days after the child’s first birthday in March 1899, failed to invoke any sympathy or understanding of John’s situation from departmental officials. Accordingly, on the basis of the report of an inspection conducted later that same year accusing him of ‘the inefficient management of his school’, John received an official reprimand from the department, was reduced to a 2B classification and then given instructions in February 1900 to proceed with his family on transfer to the Summer Island Public School near Ashfield, on the western outskirts of Sydney.²⁴ In a way, this outcome represented at least a partial victory for him because, although he had to take a reduction in salary and move to a small, single-teacher school once again, John was finally to be situated near a large urban centre, where living conditions more suited to a family such as his would be there for them to enjoy. This is what he had wanted from the beginning of his teaching career in January 1880 but, unfortunately for him and his family, the department had contrived to deny it to him for twenty years and more. Now, at 50 years of age, he could finally see a better future ahead and would continue working as a teacher in the Sydney area, under more favourable circumstances, until forced into retirement by ill health in 1908.

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²² ‘Explanation Re State of School’ dated 2-11-97 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, to F. Bridges, Chief Inspector, Sydney, and response dated 19-11-97 from McCredie to Chief Inspector, in *ibid.*

²³ Letter of 14-10-93 from John Ainsworth, Public School Lucknow, to J. McCredie, District Inspector, Bathurst, in *ibid.*

²⁴ NSW SR Teachers’ Roll No.1, p.188.