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THE JOURNAL OF  
ANNIE BAXTER DAWBIN

*July 1858 – May 1868*

*Edited by*

LUCY FROST

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## INTRODUCTION

WHEN Annie Baxter sailed to Australia in 1834 as a bride of seventeen, she left the writings of girlhood with her uncle for safekeeping. Sixteen years later she returned to England and found at her sister's the box entrusted to her guardian. Privacy had been traduced: 'The 5 sovereigns had been purloined; and one of my Journals. My dearest Uncle had torn some of my letters up, and likewise a piece from my Journal – which was certainly far better out, than in, the book'.<sup>1</sup> This uncle was not the only man to interfere. In 1843 on their cattle station in New South Wales, Andrew Baxter had broken open a locked tin box, read another of his wife's indiscreet notebooks, and destroyed its first thirty pages. At least one further notebook has vanished, possibly into the hands of an admirer to whom it was lent. Nevertheless, thirty-two of the Journal's notebooks survive, some 845,000 words penned across five-and-a-half thousand pages between 1834 and 1868.

They constitute a remarkable achievement, unmatched in colonial Australian letters. An unusually detailed and intimate story is told within the broad social narrative of European settlement. Annie was a flamboyant woman of decided opinions and considerable charm who moved in circles where things were happening, and in the Journal she wrote what she saw and heard. She chronicled the world of the 50th Regiment stationed first in Launceston and then in Sydney, where Andrew Baxter, a young lieutenant, became seriously ill.

<sup>1</sup> Notebook 15: 5 May 1851. Entries in the surviving notebooks are henceforth cited in the form '(15: 5 May 1851)' or, if the entry has no exact date, '(15: [ ] May 1851)'. The notebooks are held in the Dixon Library, State Library of New South Wales (hereafter, Dixon). For further details, see Description of the Notebooks.

Accompanying her convalescing husband on a prolonged visit to a friend's cattle station in northern New South Wales, Annie evoked the lure of the Bush. She and Baxter shared a dream of taking up land in the recently opened Macleay River District and working hard for a few years until they could return to England with sufficient money to live in a style no officer's salary could provide. Annie encouraged her husband to sell his Army commission, and in her *Journal* proudly charted the building of Yesabba and her integral part in station life. When the colony's economy collapsed and the under-capitalised Yesabba was sold, Annie recounted the Baxters' overland trek to Port Phillip, and their arrival in the Port Fairy District. As she wrote of establishing their new station, Yambuck, and of the squatters' world she enjoyed, her notebooks increasingly became as well a portrait of marital woe. Eventually, the death of her brother's wife in Hobart gave her a socially acceptable reason to leave: as a woman without children of her own, she was accepting a duty to care for her motherless nephew and niece.<sup>2</sup> During her years with this family, Annie chronicles their return to England (where she discovered how much Australia had changed her), and later to Cork, which suited her well until her brother remarried and his bride took control of the household. The *Journal* then becomes the account of a dependent woman, trapped and testy. Escape came unexpectedly through Andrew Baxter: he had sold Yambuck, invested its profits in buying real estate in the booming Melbourne of the gold rush, and killed himself. When Baxter's brother laid claim to the estate, Annie returned to Australia to contest the will, and within a few months had proved her right to considerable property, which she sold for a small fortune. She immediately married Robert Dawbin, whom she had met on the voyage out, entrusting to him the wealth which might have enabled her to live comfortably in Ireland, as she had initially contemplated. The present volume begins within the first year of their marriage and continues until the *Journal* stops.

### **The early years of the *Journal***

The narrative voice of 1858 sounds confident and expansive as it had not twenty-four years earlier when the young Annie had opened a

<sup>2</sup> See the Hadden Family Tree, and Biographical Notes: its entries are referenced hereafter by 'q.v.'.