

SIR GEORGE D'AGUILAR: THE MAN BEHIND A QUEENSLAND PLACE NAME

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How a name from medieval Spain came to appear on Queensland maps

In November 2026, a member of the Queensland Family History Society contacted me asking whether I knew anything about the man after whom the D'Aguilar Highway was named. She explained that the nearby mountain range had been named in 1827 by **Sir Thomas Mitchell**, Surveyor-General of New South Wales; possibly on the suggestion of the Governor, **Lieutenant General Ralph Darling**.

I had been researching the d'Aguilar family for several years and had already established that **George d'Aguilar's** ancestors came from Jewish communities that settled in Iberia during Roman times. These communities survived and often prospered until around 1478, when the Roman Catholic Church initiated a series of Inquisitions. Jews were frequently accused and inevitably found guilty. Punishments ranged from heavy fines and imprisonment to public humiliation or, in some cases, death.

One such Jewish community lived around the town of Aguilar de Campoo in northern Spain¹. During the early 1500s, the Inquisition forced many Jewish families to flee into Portugal, where they settled in and around the small trading town of Mogadouro, some 350 km from their former home.



Map showing the modern borders of Spain and Portugal

The Pereira Lopes Family

Among those who moved to Mogadouro were the Pereira and Lopes families. Records show that **Isabel Pereira** married **Gaspar Lopes** around 1615. They are the fourth great-grandparents of Sir George d'Aguilar.

Between 1500 and 1717 the family moved repeatedly between Spain and Portugal as the focus of the Inquisition shifted. This movement contributed to challenges in tracing the family name.

Problems with Names

Tracking the family's movements was complicated by Iberian naming customs. In Spain and Portugal, prominent families often used double surnames. In Portugal, the woman's surname traditionally came first; in Spain, the order was reversed. Thus, Isabel and Gaspar's family was known as *Pereira Lopes* in Portugal but *Lopes Pereira* in Spain. Variations in spelling added further complexity when searching modern alphabetical databases.

Manuel Lopes Pereira d'Aguilar (1645–1712)

Manuel was the first family member to add the suffix "d'Aguilar," doing so while living in Spain.

He was a successful merchant and importer of tobacco, then a new and highly lucrative product. Manuel held several Royal Warrants granting him monopoly rights for the sale of tobacco in several Spanish kingdoms. But from 1700 Jews were barred from holding such warrants.

Manuel therefore moved to Portugal, resuming the name Pereira Lopes, and became a customs contractor in Porto, valuing imported goods and determining taxes. In 1710 he was appointed General Administrator for Tobacco in Portugal. Soon afterwards, Archduke Charles of Austria visited Portugal, met Manuel, and learned both the profitability of tobacco and the tax revenues it generated. This meeting proved

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significant, as Charles later became Holy Roman Emperor in 1711.

Manuel died in 1712, leaving his teenage son Diogo to inherit the business.

Diogo / Diego / Moses Lopes Pereira d'Aguilar (1696–1759)

Diogo (known as Diego in Spain and Moses in London) was an extraordinary figure. He inherited the business at 17 and expanded it rapidly, trading in tobacco, and sugar. Increased threats from the Portuguese Inquisition forced the family to move to Amsterdam, where Diogo joined the Sephardic synagogue and met his future wife, **Simha da Fonseca**.

Around 1717, Diogo relocated to London. He joined the Bevis Marks Synagogue and adopted the name Moses. In London he went into business with his brother-in-law, **Gabriel de Lima**, establishing what became the city's largest gold-trading firm.

Naturalised as a British citizen in 1725, Moses was soon invited to Vienna by Emperor Charles VI to help improve royal revenues from the Austrian tobacco monopoly. To secure his services, the Emperor granted him the title **Baron of the Holy Roman Empire** in 1726. After marrying Simha in Amsterdam, Moses and his extended family settled in Vienna.

From then on, the family name became d'Aguilar². As was his right, he styled himself *Baron d'Aguilar* and adopted a heraldic crest featuring a lion rampant holding a tobacco plant, three pear trees (from the Portuguese *pereira*), and an eagle (from the Spanish *aguilar*).



Stylised representation of the d'Aguilar family crest

Life in Vienna and return to London

In Vienna, Moses and Simha raised fifteen children. Moses prospered as an investor, tobacco importer, banker, and financier to successive emperors. He contributed to the extension of Schönbrunn Palace and held senior administrative posts within the Habsburg Empire. By modern standards, he would be regarded as a billionaire.

In 1755 the family returned to London due to the death of Moses's business partner, which required him to take charge of the firm's gold bullion in person. And perhaps also to arrange suitable marriages for his children.

Simha died soon after their return; Moses died three years later and was buried beside her in the Portuguese Cemetery on Mile End Road.

Their eldest son, **Ephraim**, inherited both the barony and the business. Eight of the younger children were still under 21 and were cared for by their elder siblings, **Rachel**, and Ephraim.

Solomon d'Aguilar (1753–1817)

The youngest³ of Moses's children, **Solomon**, was born in 1753 and grew up at the family home in Bishopsgate, London. As a young man he travelled widely, probably in search of trading partners across the Atlantic.

It is likely during these travels that he met his wife, **Margaret**, and began a family. They later returned to England (possibly due to the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in 1775) where records show Solomon was a merchant.

Solomon made a dramatic change of career in 1779 when he joined the 2nd Dragoon Guards as an officer. This caused a serious rift within his family because at that time (until 1828) non-conformists, including Jews, were barred from holding Crown appointments. To accept a commission, Solomon had to renounce Judaism. The publication of his commission in the *London Gazette* on 30 October 1779 was a public declaration of his conversion to Christianity and this would have deeply offended the Jewish community at Bevis Marks Synagogue.

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Merchant in Liverpool

Solomon resigned his commission in 1784, probably due to injury, and moved to Liverpool where he established himself as an import-export merchant at a time when Liverpool was Britain's major trans-Atlantic port. His business prospered and the family lived comfortably. Solomon died in 1817 and was buried in his family vault at St Mary's Church in Liverpool.

George Charles d'Aguilar (1784–1855)

George was Solomon's fourth child and his second son: traditionally the son destined for a military career. In September 1799, at age 15, he joined the Army and served in India with the 86th Regiment of Foot. He was promoted to Lieutenant in 1803 but was severely wounded in action. After recovering, he returned to England and was promoted to Captain in 1808 at the unusually young age of 24.

The Walcheren Campaign and meeting Ralph Darling

In 1809 d'Aguilar took part in the Walcheren Campaign. This was a British attempt to deny the French access to Antwerp by occupying Walcheren Island. It was here that Captain d'Aguilar likely met **Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Darling**, then Deputy Adjutant General. Although Darling was more senior, the two almost certainly worked together.

Based on their later actions, it appears they shared a common interest in administrative efficiency and in developing a fair, rules-based system of military discipline. Darling seems to have recognised d'Aguilar's talent for administration, because d'Aguilar subsequently joined the Adjutant General's staff.

The Role of the Adjutant General

The Adjutant General oversaw recruitment, pay, discipline, and organisational processes within the Army. Each regiment had its own adjutant, who reported to the General Staff Adjutant General in London, one of the Army's most senior roles.

Advancement Through Ability

Although the Walcheren Campaign was a disaster due to disease and poor sanitation, both Darling and d'Aguilar advanced their careers.

During the 1810s, d'Aguilar held several important administrative posts. He served in Sicily and undertook special missions to Turkey and Spain. He gained a reputation as a highly competent, intelligent, and reliable staff officer, culminating in his promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1813.

Meanwhile, Darling rose to become Deputy Adjutant General and was later promoted to Major General. In 1818 he was appointed Acting Governor and Garrison Commander of Mauritius, where he confronted tensions arising from the abolition of the slave trade. Despite conflict with the French colonial elite, he returned to England in 1823 with official commendation.

That same year, d'Aguilar became Assistant Adjutant General of the Horse Guards which was a highly desirable post previously held by Darling. It is plausible that Darling supported d'Aguilar's candidacy. It also seems likely that during their time together in London, the two men discussed the principles of military jurisprudence that later appeared in d'Aguilar's court-martial manual.

Darling: Governor of New South Wales

In November 1824 Darling was appointed Governor of New South Wales. He introduced reforms aimed at improving public administration, expanding settlement, and tightening discipline within the penal system. His strict and uncompromising leadership drew criticism for being cruel and severe.

During the colonial 'discovery' of Australia, Darling appears to have been fond of naming geographical features after himself: the Darling River, Darling Downs, and Darling Harbour among them. However, it is unlikely that he personally directed that the name d'Aguilar be given to a newly identified range of mountains. More plausibly, the Surveyor-General was provided with a short list of

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names known to be favoured by the Governor.

The inclusion of d'Aguilar's name on such a list is surprising. In 1827, d'Aguilar was not a general, not a member of the Royal Family, and not a Cabinet Minister. His name had never even appeared in *The Times* newspaper. He was, in effect, an anonymous lieutenant-colonel in London. I suspect his name was put forward because he was known to be a protégé of the Governor and a fellow disciplinarian.

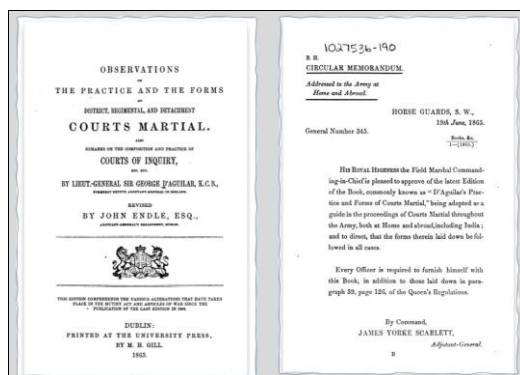
For whatever reason, the D'Aguilar Range, and later the D'Aguilar Highway and the town of D'Aguilar, came to be on the maps of Queensland.

However, d'Aguilar's later achievements more than justified the honour.

D'Aguilar's later achievements

In 1830 d'Aguilar was appointed Deputy Adjutant General in Ireland, working in Dublin for more than a decade. During this time, he published several books, including a translation of Napoleon's *The Officer's Manual: Military Maxims* and a translation of the German drama *Fiesco, The Conspiracy of Genoa*.

His most influential work, however, was *Observations on the Practice and the Forms of District, Regimental, and Detachment Courts Martial*, the first codification of military law in the British Army. It remained required reading for officers until 1878 and established him as a major figure in military jurisprudence.



d'Aguilar Court Martial book title page and memo

In 1841 d'Aguilar was promoted to Major General, and two years later received one of the most significant appointments of his career.

Commander of British Forces in China

Following Britain's victory in the First Opium War (1839–1842), the Treaty of Nanking required military enforcement. In 1843, d'Aguilar was appointed Commander of British Forces in China, based in Hong Kong.



Portrait of Major General d'Aguilar c.1845, source Wikimedia

In 1847 d'Aguilar led a punitive expedition up the Pearl (Canton) River after British demands for redress went unmet. Although small, d'Aguilar's force captured all the forts and batteries at the Bogue (Humen Strait), disabling nearly 900 guns. Canton itself escaped attack only because Chinese officials quickly submitted. D'Aguilar's actions were applauded by Foreign Secretary **Lord Palmerston**.

D'Aguilar returned to England in 1848. He was promoted to lieutenant-general in 1851 and retired the following year after 52 years of service. He had married **Eliza Drinkwater** in 1809; together they had four children, two of whom became senior military officers. D'Aguilar died in 1855 and was buried in Hove Cemetery, Sussex.

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Conclusion

The name d'Aguilar came from a small town in northern Spain. It arrived in Australia to honour a man, who presciently as it turned out, became one of the heroes of British imperial policy. For better or worse, George d'Aguilar cemented Britain's colonial interests in China. Today the d'Aguilar name features on maps both as a legacy of colonialism and as a reminder of a fascinating family history.

References:

¹ For simplicity I am using the modern names, and boundaries, of Spain and Portugal throughout.

² NB the name is correctly prefixed with a lower-case d.

³ Solomon may have had a twin brother, Benjamin.

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Corrections and comments are most welcome, please email [charles@licomp.com](mailto:charles@licomp.com).

### Sources:

It is fortunate that many records from synagogues in London, Amsterdam, Portugal and Spain have survived. Research into these archives has been published in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*.

For the history of the d'Aguilar family prior to 1759, I am indebted to academic historian Professor Michael Silber from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

A Jewish family with close connections to the d'Aguilar's is the Baruch Lousadas. One of their descendants, Julian Land, wrote *My Baruch Lousada Ancestors and their place in the Western Sephardic Diaspora* published in 2023. The book is accompanied with an excellent website that contained many links to further sources <http://www.barrow-lousada.org/>. I found both of these to be hugely helpful.

(photographs provided by the author)