

1837

‘MAY SOUTH AUSTRALIA FLOURISH!’

It may seem paradoxical for a prisoner to inspire the founding of the only colony in Australia never to receive convicts, or for the first two issues of a ‘weekly’ newspaper to appear one year and 19 000 kilo-metres apart. Yet that’s what happened in South Australia just under 150 years ago.

While incarcerated in London’s infamous Newgate Prison for tricking a teenage heiress into a marriage later dissolved by Parliament, Edward Gibbon Wakefield wrote a series of letters to the London *Morning Chronicle* during 1829 in which he proposed a new system to develop the colonies and relieve Britain of her excess population, without transporting convicts and at little cost to the Crown.

In the letters, published later in book form as *A Letter from Sydney, the Principal Town of Australasia*, the anonymous author, who appeared to be a wealthy New South Welshman, advocated the sale of small tracts of Crown land in the colonies to raise enough funds to finance large-scale emigration

from Britain by free men and women.

The land, he stressed, had to be sold at a 'sufficient price' to prevent labourers from being able to buy any until they had worked for other landowners and saved for some time. This would relieve the labour shortage without the need for convicts, while at the same time creating new markets for British products.

The colonies, wrote Wakefield, 'would, every day, open new fields to 'all trades, pursuits, and professions,' which in England 'are becoming more and more overstocked'... every grant of land in these colonies would be an extension, though distant, of Britain itself, and would provide so much more room for all classes of Britons...'

The best of British civilisation would, in effect, be transplanted to the antipodes.

Wakefield's theory of 'systematic colonisation' attracted considerable attention, and, after two abortive attempts to gain government support, the South Australian Association was formed, which successfully lobbied Parliament in 1834 to pass a South Australian Colonization Act.

Authority in the new Crown colony, which had been explored along the coast by Matthew Flinders in the *Endeavour* in 1802, was vested in the Colonial Office, while an eleven-man Colonisation Commission was given control over land sales, surveying, and emigration. The Act also prohibited the landing of convicts in the new colony.

Captain John Hindmarsh was appointed Governor, representing the Colo-

nial Office, while the Resident Commissioner, James Fisher, and the Surveyor-General, Colonel William Light, were responsible to the Colonisation Commission.

On 18 June 1836 the first issue of the *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register* was published in London, providing information about the colonisation venture and announcing that a printing press and type were *en route* to South Australia where the newspaper would continue publication.

The *Register* was a joint venture of Robert Thomas, a Welsh printer and stationer, and George Stevenson, a former journalist for the London *Globe*, a newspaper partly owned in 1836 by Colonel Robert Torrens, chairman of the Colonisation Commission. Stevenson, in addition to editing the new colonial newspaper, was also appointed private secretary to the Governor, Clerk of the Council, and Protector of Aborigines. He sailed with Hindmarsh in the *Buffalo* on 28 June 1836.

The first South Australian issue of the *Register* (Vol. 1, No.2) appeared in Adelaide on 3 June 1837. It provided a detailed — if somewhat dated — picture of the arrival of the Governor at Holdfast Bay (Glenelg) six months earlier:

At two o'clock on the same day (December 28), His Excellency... met other Members of Council in Mr Gouger's tent, where His Majesty's Order in Council, erecting South Australia into a Province, and appointing the Colonial Officers, and His Excellency's Commission as Governor and Commander-in-Chief, were read... The Commission was afterwards read to the Settlers, of whom about 200 were present. The British flag was

displayed under a royal salute. The Marines fired a feu de joie, and the Buffalo saluted the Governor with 15 guns. A cold collation, provided for the occasion, was laid out in the open air, of which the party partook... Nothing could be more delightful or promising than the portion of the Plains named by His Excellency, Glenelg, on which the Government was constituted... The soil appeared to be of the highest quality, and was pronounced equal, by those who had seen both, to the prairies of Ohio and Indiana...

The proceedings of the day concluded happily as they had begun. Good feeling and good fellowship prevailed on all sides, and 'MAY SOUTH AUSTRALIA FLOURISH!' was the earnest prayer of every heart.

Another story in this issue noted: 'The Christian Public are hereby informed, that the only obstacle in the way of the speedy erection of Trinity Church, is the want of funds. It is hoped that, under these circumstances, all who dread the evil of our becoming a Sabbath-desecrating, and consequently, a God-less people, will readily contribute towards so desirable an object as the erection of a house of worship.'

Under the headline 'The Natives', another report stated: 'It is a source of much gratification that the Natives of that portion of the Province chosen for the first settlement, are far superior to the ordinary race of New Hollanders. Their friendly dispositions, honesty, and inoffensive conduct, may fairly set at rest all the fears that might at first have been entertained...'

Adelaide, named after the consort of William IV, was laid out by Colonel Light on the Torrens River and plots were sold in March 1837, but land in the surrounding area was not surveyed until May of the following year.

Although settlers continued to arrive, there was such a remarkable lack of endeavour that by 1839 only '443 of the 170 500 acres' sold had been cultivated, while imports topped £346 000, and exports amounted to a mere £22 500.

In addition, the divided authority and clash of personalities between Hindmarsh and Fisher made stable government impossible. As soon as this became known in London, both men were dismissed. Their posts were combined, and Colonel George Gawler appointed to take over.

But, by the early 1840s, South Australia was bankrupt. The British Government assumed complete control, paid the Commission's debts, and turned Wakefield's dream into an ordinary British colony.

The economy was given a boost with the discovery of copper at Kapunda in 1842, and at Burra Burra in 1845. Migrants again streamed to the colony to such an extent that by 1850 the population exceeded 63 000 and responsible government, 'consisting of a Legislative Council of sixteen elected and eight nominated members, was introduced. The colony of migrants was, at last, on the road to nationhood.

Although Wakefield's ambitious scheme ended in bankruptcy, he must be credited for inspiring the colonisation of a substantial part of the continent with a population of free settlers, who were to lead the rest of the nation in such matters as women suffrage, property registration, and international telegraphic communications. Which was not a bad response to eleven letters written from a prison cell.