1850
A FREE VICTORIA!

In 1848 the independence-minded inhabitants of Melbourne, capital of the Port Phillip District, voiced their protest at being ruled from Sydney, by electing as their representative to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey.

Whether this doubtful honour in any way influenced the Whig minister in their favour is not known, but within two years the *Melbourne Morning Herald* could announce — in the 1850 equivalent of today's banner headlines — that the British Parliament had agreed to the separation of Port Phillip from New South Wales, with the new colony to be called Victoria in honour of the monarch.

Only the Royal Assent was still lacking, but this, predicted the newspaper, 'is a mere matter of course'.

In Melbourne, which housed about a third of the new colony's 80 000 people, the *Herald* report, written in great excitement by Edmund Finn, triggered widespread celebrations complete with pealing church bells, fireworks, bonfires, volleys of gunfire, and elegant balls.

But, reported the *Argus* with evident satisfaction, 'There have been no excesses. The newly-born nation has proved its title to freedom by moderation in the hour of victory.' As beacon fires spread the news to country towns their inhabitants also joined in the celebrations.

On 1 July 1851 the Colony of Victoria was officially proclaimed over the area bounded in the north by a line stretching from Cape Howe to the nearest source of the River Murray, and then downstream to the South Australian border.

With the new Legislative Assembly of twenty elected members and only ten nominated by the Governor, the colonists at last gained some of the say in their affairs which they had been clamouring for since before their first petition had been rejected ten years earlier.

The Assembly could make laws 'not repugnant to the laws of England', and had control over all revenue except that derived from the sale of Crown lands, half of which was earmarked to promote immigration, and the rest for use by the governor as he saw fit.

Port Phillip Bay was first occupied in October 1803 by a group of free settlers and convicts under David Collins, the first Judge-Advocate of New South Wales, who had been ordered to establish a settlement on Bass Strait so as to forestall any similar move by the French.

But, being unhappy about the location on the mainland, Collins was soon granted permission to move the settlement across the water to Van Diemen's Land, where he chose as his headquarters the present-day Hobart and ruled

as Lieutenant-Governor for six years until his death.

Some thirty years elapsed before another move was made towards a permanent settlement at Port Phillip Bay. This time, ironically, it was made by two groups from Van Diemen's Land, led by John Batman and John Pascoe Fawkner.

In August 1836 the New South Wales Surveyor-General, Major T. L. Mitchell, trekked overland from Sydney to Portland Bay, several hundred kilometres to the west of Port Phillip Bay, where another Vandemonian, Edward Henty, had settled two years earlier. Mitchell discovered lush grazing lands in the interior and opened up a stock route, inspiring such an influx of graziers that within seven years the district's sheep and cattle totalled more than 1.5 million.

A township on the Yarra estuary was surveyed in 1837 and named after the then British Prime Minister, Viscount Melbourne. Two years later a former schoolmaster, Charles Joseph La Trobe, arrived as Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, which contained about 227 000 square kilometres.

George Arden, editor of the *Port Phillip Gazette,* described early Melbourne as appearing more like villages he had seen in the interior of India,

... a nucleus of huts embowered in the forest foliage... than any collection of buildings formed by European hands. It was at that time possessed of two wooden houses, serving the purposes of hotels or inns to the settlers who frequented the little town... Two or three shops forming general emporiums for every description of immediately useful articles, although

exceedingly inferior, opened their doors to the public, while a branch establishment of a Van Diemen's Land bank flourished on its monetary exchanges, discounts, and circulation. A manuscript newspaper, conducted by one of the early colonists, enlightens the inhabitants as to their rights and necessities.