

Highly Favoured By Nature: Mirageous South Australia

Address given to the Cartographic Conference by J C Bannon

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This is the story of a utopian idea, the construction of a community on theoretical principles, the success of which would be guaranteed if it could be established in an ideal location, highly favoured by nature. It is the story of such a community confronted with an iron reality that made it suspect that what it saw was not an oasis but a mirage, but took practical steps and used great ingenuity to survive and prosper.

In the early 1830s there was a theory of colonisation in search of a colony. Edward Gibbon Wakefield published his ideas in 1829 using the penal colony of New South Wales as the template for his reforms in a pamphlet called in its original edition *A Sketch of a Proposal for Colonizing Australasia*, and in its revised form *A Letter from Sydney*. He had never visited the place although he must have had some feel for its penal nature as he wrote it while he was incarcerated in Newgate Prison. Inspired by his ideas, the proponents of the Wakefield Scheme of colonisation searched the maps of the British Empire and its possessions, studied the reports of mariners, travellers and explorers and not surprisingly focussed on the southern ocean, lighting on an area on the southern coast of what they called New Holland (although the name 'Australia' had been in general use for over a decade) well to the east of the convict settlement of New South Wales. The location seemed to have everything required for successful systematic European settlement.

The origin of what we now call the State of South Australia was unique in its time, as the only British colony whose foundation rested on an Act of Parliament, a product of enlightenment thinking and the latest economic theory on how a colony could be established and induced to prosper; to be self-supporting and eventually self-governing. The selection of the site was based on cartography. Parts of the map of the interior needed to be filled in but there was no reason to believe that the area defined as the boundaries of South Australia would not be the perfect location for practical application of systematic colonisation.

Following the formation of the South Australian Land Company a detailed proposal for planting a colony was put to the Crown in 1832. It was conceded that there was more information needed about the fitness of the location, but the first settlers would be few and carefully selected and the land in the neighbourhood of the first settlement would be surveyed, and maps prepared as a matter of priority. But the assumption was that the land's suitability would be easily proved. The draft Charter presented by the Company described the area as 'enjoying a temperate and salubrious climate, and a soil adapted for the production of all the necessaries of life, and of many valuable articles of commerce' and therefore 'eminently fitted' for settlement. The Act dated 15 August 1834 *to empower His Majesty to erect South Australia into a British Province or Provinces and provide for the Colonization and Government thereof* was not so positive, referring to lands 'which are *supposed* [my emphasis] to be fit for the purpose of colonisation.' The Act incidentally referred to 'waste and unoccupied lands' which sits oddly beside the proviso in the Letters Patent issued to the Governor in 1836 that 'nothing therein contained shall affect the rights of any Aboriginal Natives of the said province to the actual occupation or enjoyment in their own persons or on the persons of their descendents of any lands therein now actually occupied or enjoyed by such natives.' Like some other aspects of the plan of settlement those rights and the promise that one fifth of every 80 acre section surveyed would be reserved for the use of the indigenous people was an early casualty of the realities of settlement.

In December 1835 the Commissioners appointed under the Act issued a detailed description of the new colony and the conditions under which it would be settled. Intending emigrants were advised that the colony covered an area at least twice as large as the British Isles, and while not occupied by Europeans had been explored by navigators and others. Captain Matthew Flinders and the Frenchman Baudin had surveyed the coast in 1802. Less than thirty years later Captain Charles Sturt had travelled several hundred miles in the interior of the province and traced the course of the Murray River. Maps had been published filling the interior with speculative waterways, deltas and inland seas. Michael Cathcart's fine book *The Water Dreamers* published last year gives an enthralling description of the way that myths, and myths about myths, were created as people tried to make sense of what the explorers were reporting.

All reports suggested that many parts of South Australia would prove ideal for colonisation. The Commissioners advised that ‘certain spots, which appear to be most favoured by nature’ would be surveyed before the arrival of the main body of settlers. They spoke eloquently of the geographical and climatic advantages as follows:

Numerous voyagers agree in describing this part of Australia as containing much fertile soil, and as possessing a genial climate resembling that of the south of Europe; while the numerous gulfs and narrow seas with which it abounds, offer unusual facilities for communication by water. The geographical situation of South Australia, which lays it open to the prevailing westerly winds, justifies the expectation that the new colony will, to say the least, be comparatively free from the droughts which in New South Wales are occasionally so destructive. The average length of the passage to Spencer’s Gulf will probably be somewhat less than four months. The best time of arrival will be about August, that is, early in the Australian spring. This, however, is a point of minor importance, as there is no severe season in South Australia; the summer being free from excessive heat, and the winter so mild that frosts are of extremely rare occurrence.

One advocate invited prospective emigrants to ‘come with me to the beautiful climate of South Australia rather than ramble over the back settlements of America or the bleak and dreary wilds of Canada or reside in such a society as the penal settlements afford’.

Encouraged by such reports many signed up. They were enticed by the conditions which offered cheap land and the labour to develop it to all those who had capital, and a free passage, ready employment and the prospect of eventually purchasing their own land to labourers and tradesmen. The added attraction of a colony established on economically rational principles, convict-free, open to all religions and with the prospect of a democratic franchise and local self-government as soon as the population reached a certain level (50,000 was one figure used) made it desirable indeed. A colony with the prospects and opportunities of New South Wales but with none of its baggage of autocracy and penalty was very attractive.

The high ideals and aspirations embodied in the founding charter were never lost sight of – and it can be argued are present in South Australia to this day. But they have persisted in the face of the reality that the site was chosen and boundaries drawn under a complete misapprehension as to what lay beyond the coasts charted by Flinders; they were misled by reports from George Sutherland of his sojourn for eight months in 1819 on the fertile island full of kangaroos and emus at the foot of the gulfs, unoccupied by native peoples where a few sealers and whalers had led a

precarious and brutal existence; and those of Sturt as he speculated about what lay beyond the waters of the mighty, but unique, river that he had navigated in 1829-30 to the South Australian coast. A marvellous vision but an optical illusion, a mirage.

The first issue was the severe limits of the area that could be sustainably settled and farmed. As land was explored, surveyed and occupied there was a slow realisation that there was no hinterland. Sturt's expedition of 1844-6 set out with high hopes of finding the inland water system and only just managed to survive, naming Mount Hopeless in the northern Flinders Ranges and discovering the Stony Desert which is named after him. As the *Atlas of South Australia* puts it: 'The explorations of the 1840s generated a gloomy view of South Australia as a small "fertile island" of habitable country enclosed on the east by the sterile sands and limestone of the Murray plains, on the north by a vast horseshoe of salt lakes, and by a waterless desert to the west.' (Incidentally, the *Atlas*, edited by cartographers and geographers Trevor Griffin and Murray McCaskill was one of the best things to be produced for SA's 150th Jubilee in 1986 – a great wealth of information, graphs and maps). But there was still confusing evidence from time to time and some optimism, for instance in 1857 when George Goyder found Lake Torrens full of water and surrounded by vegetation. By the late 1850s A C Gregory's explorations into the centre had confirmed what the South Australians had feared – that Sturt's deserts stretched north and there was no great river or inland sea but a system of dry salt lakes.

Almost exactly 150 years ago John MacDouall Stuart made the first of his three expeditions sponsored by the South Australian Government. His success in crossing the continent from south to north resulted in the transfer of jurisdiction of the Northern Territory to SA which had ambitions to develop the tropical north. But it was clear that within SA itself there was a limit to settlement and what has been well described as 'a margin' to the good earth. The Surveyor-General George Goyder took advantage of some dry years in the 1860s and drew a line based on examination of vegetation, which marked the limit of country that could be safely cropped. The closer settlement policies of South Australia had limited the stranglehold of squatters and graziers over good land and farmers had settled and made SA the granary of Australia. Closer settlement and shortage of labour produced ideas and technology that increased productivity in a big way. There was a huge drive to succeed. So Ridley's stripper and reaper was developed in the 1840s and the stump jump plough in the early 1870s. Success in stopping phylloxera at the Victorian border saved the

SA wine industry and enabled it to achieve a dominance in Australia it has retained today. Even the problems of the arid north were dealt with. In 1846 there was one camel in the colony (partly responsible for the accidental death of the explorer Horrocks) but two decades later the Muslim cameleers were trading and carrying supplies throughout the outback. Other experiments had limited success: the Government ostrich farm – with over 500 birds by the 1890s and well over a 1,000 a decade later, before the industry collapsed with the end of the fashion for feathered hats in World War I.

Despite much sheep and cattle grazing South Australia was in the business of wheat. The demand for farmland was overwhelming and by the early 1870s most of the land below Goyder's line was devoted to agriculture, the so-called 'settled areas'. The Government was under huge pressure to make land north of the Line available whatever the risk. Goyder warned against it, but a run of good seasons made him seem over-cautious and in 1874 the restrictions were lifted and the Government empowered to survey land for selection on credit anywhere in the colony. For the next decade settlement proceeded in the north. Transport of the crop was easy with ready access to the coast through the gulf ports reinforced by railway development. Now the railways were pushed north to the edge of Goyder's line and beyond – from Port Augusta to Quorn and finally to Hergott's Springs (given the non-Germanic name 'Marree' in WWI). The fantasy of the vision and the hubris of the time is demonstrated by the re-naming in the 1870s, of 'Government Gums' one of the far north railway stations and settlements, at the personal suggestion of the Governor Sir William Jervois, as 'Farina' 'grain town'.

The seasons turned and by the mid-eighties it was apparent that Goyder had been right and farmers were forced to abandon their properties and allow their civic centres to become ghost towns. The Willochra plain is littered with the sad relics of their unfounded optimism.

South Australia had rightly been called 'the granary of Australia'. From 1865 until 1891 it produced more grain each year than Victoria and New South Wales combined. From the mid 1880s, low rainfall and decreasing soil quality saw production falling – the neighbouring colonies passed SA's volume in 1892 and from 1898 Victoria alone produced more. Limits had been reached.

As John Hirst puts it

By about 1890 it was clear that the settled areas would not extend more than one hundred miles from the coast. Beyond these areas lay the greater portion of the State's land. Great tracts in the west and north east were desert but the remainder could to varying degrees support sheep and cattle. In these outback regions there were few people and only an occasional settlement that could scarcely be called a town. Here the squatter had nothing to fear from the farmer but much from drought and vermin.

The rabbit plagues and the ongoing drought kept South Australia in economic depression and suffering net population loss for the rest of the nineteenth and the first four years of the twentieth century. With it came an understandable crisis in confidence. The degree to which the colony had not fulfilled expectations was graphically demonstrated by the fate of its Jubilee. There been one or two early glitches in the first years after foundation in the 1830s which could be easily explained away as the new province was developed, but there was no explaining away the great vulnerabilities had been so sharply exposed. The year 1886 merging into 1887, (which also coincided with Queen Victoria's jubilee and imperial celebration) was planned as a great event for South Australia. A big Intercolonial and International Exhibition was planned to celebrate the signal achievements of the province. But the plans began to unravel as South Australia fell on very hard economic times. At one stage it looked as if the whole exhibition itself was going to be cancelled until some private benefactors stepped in and rescued the proceedings, in a sense shaming the government into ensuring that something happened in 1886-87. The exhibition building that stood on North Terrace for so many years was a heritage of the celebration which was eventually held, but both the building and the ceremonies were in a very much more muted form than had originally been conceived. The new Parliament House, planned as a centrepiece of celebration, was opened in 1889 half completed and stood in its unfinished state at the most prominent intersection in the city for the next fifty years – a symbol of the prudence or the poverty of the colony depending on your perspective.

Community and government was not passive in the face of setbacks. Ideas to overcome the problems were actively sought

One big idea was the acquisition of the Northern Territory in 1863. The great north-south corridor opened by Stuart gave SA all sorts of theoretical opportunities. Despite all attempts to develop it never lived up to its promise and became an incubus on the Treasury. Perhaps the one tangible advantage was the Overland Telegraph which made SA the communication hub with the world beyond Australia. SA's

jurisdiction in the Territory allowed it take the initiative and to see off rival routes through Queensland.

Another was mining. Drilling for oil had not been productive (Australia's first oil traces in SA's south east turned out to be seaweed), and no major black coal seams were present. After initial success with copper at Kapunda, Burra, Moonta, and Wallaroo and some smaller mines there was nothing to match the mineral discoveries in other colonies despite energetic searching. The early copper finds saw SA as the pioneering mining area of the continent, but it experienced bad luck territorially in the mining and development area. South Australia's ingenuity turned to taking advantage of discoveries in adjoining colonies. When most of the male population left for the Victorian goldfields stripping Adelaide of its labour and commerce the gold escort managed to return some value to the province. When the world's largest silver lead zinc lode was found across the border in New South Wales, South Australians rushed to Broken Hill; the railway link was made to anchor it firmly to South Australia and Port Pirie and its smelter became vital for the preparation and shipping of its product. In the eighteen nineties South Australian investors, mining equipment manufacturers and suppliers of goods and services scrambled to take advantage of the discovery of gold in Western Australia, ignoring the Nullarbor Plain and taking their goods through the port of Esperance. Not surprisingly it was the South Australians who provided much of the advice and encouragement to the Goldfields Separation for Federation Movement, drafting their petition and presenting it in Britain. The movement forced a reluctant WA into the Commonwealth, and ensured that there was free trade and a railway constructed between the adjoining States.

The least forested colony was the first in Australia to establish a Woods and Forests department and plant state forests of softwoods and hardwoods. And an emphasis on education saw the establishment of a Botanical Gardens and Museum of Economic Botany; an Acclimatisation Society and zoo; a School of Mines a technology institute; a University and an agricultural college ahead of most other colonies.

A fundamental limitation to settlement in South Australia was the shortage of water. The vision of a thriving island settlement, perhaps akin to Vancouver Island or Newfoundland off the southern coast on Kangaroo Island was thwarted by the lack of any secure source of water there. The claim of Port Lincoln with its magnificent

harbour to be the alternative capital, promoted by the first Governor Hindmarsh among others, was undone by lack of water and an arid hinterland. Even in Adelaide the rivers proved to be little more than winter creeks losing themselves in marshes on the plain. Outbreaks of typhoid and the problems of water carting resulted in early reticulation of water to the capital and the first comprehensive deep drainage and sewage system in Australia. The potential of Whyalla could only be realised by the construction of the Morgan-Whyalla pipeline immediately after World War II and Adelaide's later expansion was only made possible by the piping of water from the Murray. This required massive filtration plants, and even this source thought to be inexhaustible and totally reliable has proved fragile and a back-up desalination plant is under construction. But so far the State has always managed to keep just ahead of crisis.

The one really well-watered area of the State, the South East, failed to live up to productive expectations and initially proved unsuitable to large scale settlement. Limestone ridges running parallel to the coast held all the water in swamps and wetlands which were flooded every winter. Stock were affected by a mysterious Coast disease. Commissioner of Lands William Milne, accompanied by Goyder made an overland January from Adelaide to Mt Gambier in the stifling summer weather of January 1863. Milne wrote a diary of the 28 day trip which has been discovered, edited and annotated by Peter Rymill and should be published shortly. It is a fascinating snapshot of the time. He wrote:

The frightful Coast disease, which has always made such havoc all along this part of the Coast of South Australia amongst sheep and cattle, has been often a subject of conversation amongst us lately. Cooke maintains that by ploughing up the land the cause (which if his theory be true) must be a weed, is extinguished, and tomorrow we have arranged that he should drive up to his Cockatoo tenants to receive confirmation of his assertion.'

The real cause would not be found for another seventy years, when CSIR experiments in the mid 1930s on Kangaroo Island and near Robe proved that Coast Disease was due to a soil and pasture deficiency of the trace elements cobalt and copper.

Milne was a great early advocate of drainage schemes in the South East – there is an inlet named for him in that area and over time they helped make the area into productive agricultural land. But it has come at the price of salinity in many areas

which, like the land north of Goyder's Line, gave initial high yields and then stopped producing.

A digression is worthwhile here as the diary incidentally paints a good picture of the famous Surveyor General George Goyder, then still in his thirties, and two years before he drew his famous Line, in action on the ground. He deals with incompetent contractors:

Tried to follow Goyder's new track, which had been laid out by the surveyor. Found it with some difficulty and followed it for some distance, but it turned out so rough and comparatively impracticable that we gave up the task, Goyder vowing that on his return he would lay it out much better himself and dismiss the surveyor.

He works out the characteristics of a port and anchorage at Lacepede Bay.

The Bay exhibits a most peculiar phenomenon in the fact that, altho' being more an open roadstead than a bay, the water is always comparatively smooth, so that vessels may always ride at anchor with perfect safety, altho' it may be blowing a severe gale dead in shore. While in every other bay on the coast the rollers come in with great violence when the wind is in a particular direction, in Lacepede Bay let it blow from what quarter it may, rollers are never severe. This remarkable fact has been frequently the subject of remark amongst nautical men and others, but no satisfactory solution of it has ever been broached. Goyder feels great interest in the circumstance and expressed a wish to take soundings in a particular direction, this direction being at right angles to the ranges of the interior. Mr Cooke immediately placed his cutter, the "Swallow" at our disposal for the purpose, and we immediately went off to her and set sail.

[After taking the] most minute and excellent series of soundings, ... showing a curious deepening and shoaling throughout with, of course, a very gradual shoaling on the whole. We knew before that for a long way out the water deepened very gradually ...

From this Goyder concluded the waves were behaving as if in a natural breakwater.

He settles boundary disputes:

Goyder left us on horseback to go and settle some claims away SW and NW. Between four and five o'clock ... the company [was] immediately closeted with Goyder, and after some two hours broke up when we understood an arrangement satisfactory to all parties was concluded.

He is not taken in by the squatters:

The country from about Johnstone's homestead and about Mt Gambier is in many places covered with ferns. Goyder thinks the squatters encourage the growth in order to frighten the people from buying land, as he thinks it could easily be eradicated.

And he bashes scrub:

the honeysuckle increased in density until we could scarcely move on. ... Goyder showed a determination to persevere at all hazards, and it was amusing to see him sometimes trudging on before with the axe over his shoulder cutting down an obstructive tree now and then.

The 1890s – a period of protracted economic depression and a very bleak outlook produced the biggest idea of them all: the prospect of federation. As I have written previously, for South Australia, with a broadly protectionist philosophy but dependent on trade in agriculture, concepts such as intercolonial free trade, imperial preference, the use of the Murray/Darling river system for trade, navigation and irrigation, and the joining of the eastern states railway network to link the Commonwealth were seen as very desirable goals. Serious claims were made for Port Augusta's place as the capital of Australia, the hub of the transport network of the continent.

National defence would be secured by of the federal government. Projecting forward one can see how South Australia's geographical position there worked to its advantage in World War II, leading to the subsequent development of a defence industry which is a very important component of our economy today. The incubus of the Northern Territory and its cost to the South Australia\n taxpayer could be transferred to the federal government which would ensure that it developed and actually fulfilled some of its promise. The building of the trans-continental railway (the term then applied to the railway north to Darwin) was promised, along with the link to Perth which took precedence by nearly a century in the end. The better management of the River Murray, and the railways and other things of that nature would be ensured through the establishment of the Interstate Commission which the South Australian delegates had argued for so strongly.

One issue resonates strongly today. It was then and still is an issue of fundamental concern for the South Australians – the question of water and the Murray. The River Murray was still a major transport artery, connecting the outback with its ports. It was also witnessing an increasing development of irrigation. In 1886 the Downer Government had lured the Chaffey Brothers to Renmark after they had experienced frustration with the Victorian Government over Mildura, and in the 1890s the Kingston Government had embarked on the establishment of experimental communal 'Village Settlements' based on the Murray

Kingston's draft of an Australian Constitution included a comprehensive Commonwealth power 'to fix the right of any colonies with reference to the user of the water of any river or stream'. It survived the 1891 Convention as a power over 'River Navigation with respect to the common purposes of two or more states or parts of the Commonwealth'. The determination of New South Wales to preserve its rights to head waters was consistent and unmovable. Downer well expressed his delegation's frustration at Adelaide in 1897 'You confirm the title of NSW not only to the bed of the river but to every drop of water in the river. If NSW decides that the whole water should be used in the interests of itself then Victoria and SA will just have to grin and bear it. 'It reminds me very much of the old story of a dispute over a beast. When two men declared it belonged to both of them one man said 'I wish to kill my half'.

The South Australians had only partial success in the insertion of a clause giving the Commonwealth power over 'the control and regulation of the River Murray and the use of the waters thereof from where it first forms the boundary between Victoria and New South Wales to the sea'. The South Australian Parliament tried again by suggesting an amendment which broadened the clause to include the tributaries of the Murray and specifically refer to the Darling Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers. The issue dominated the Melbourne session of the Convention, as the clause was withdrawn and the three States affected (Queensland was not present at the Convention) negotiated behind the scenes to reach a compromise. It proved impossible and the majority of the Convention was set to exclude the Commonwealth entirely. It could not pass laws to 'abridge the rights of a State or the residents therein to the use of the waters for conservation and irrigation.' Downer was able to get this modified slightly by having the words 'reasonable' inserted before use of the waters. In this form it is section 100 today and perhaps the time has come to legally test the meaning of what is indeed 'the reasonable use of the waters' before there is none left to use.

And so to conclude: Federation did not fulfil its promise. It was another glittering image that when reached proved to be a mirage. I don't have time to trawl through the difficulties and promise of the 20th Century but the story for South Australia is the same. But ingenuity remains and the vision has not been abandoned. And all is not necessarily mirageous.

I conclude with a story against myself. In the early eighties the then Government was extolling the prospects of the Olympic Dam discovery at Roxby Downs as the saviour of a State then in very depressed conditions. Responding as Opposition Leader I claimed that Roxby was 'a mirage in the desert'. A few years later as Premier I was involved in the ceremonies inaugurating the mine, one of the biggest in the world and opening the new town which currently has over 5,000 residents. A mirage may well become a reality sometimes - and in Mirageous South Australia this has happened often enough over the years of European settlement to give us a similar hope and optimism to that of the members of the South Australian Land Company over 175 years ago.

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