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CHAPTER VI

THE TEETHING TROUBLES OF THE INFANT SETTLEMENT

J. D. Rogers\(^{(28)}\) divides the first epoch of the story of “New South Wales” (including Queensland) into three periods of intensely personal government, ending respectively in 1801, 1810 and 1824—the last being the date of the foundation of Brisbane in the Moreton Bay District.

From 1788 to 1801, as mentioned previously, naval captains maintained solitary and peremptory rule, with the New South Wales Corps secondarily as a closed aristocracy or corporation for exclusive privilege. The constant defect was bad mothercraft—the infant colony was continuously underfed, but over-indulged in rum to an extent that would have astounded even Hogarth. The earlier inhabitants were always on the brink of starvation: had it not been for occasional supplies from the Cape of Good Hope and from Batavia, the settlement might, indeed, have collapsed. When the Second Fleet arrived, for example, the situation was desperate: they had lost 200 of their thousand convicts by disease and landed nearly 500 sick; a store ship, the “Guardian,” was lost; the “Sirius” ran ashore and was a total wreck; the Third Fleet landed one-third of its complement too ill to work!

The other defect was the inefficiency and the spirit of indifference that was typical of convict labour. Phillip, Hunter and King began State agriculture—corn, flour, hemp, grapes, hops—and pastoral pursuits—cattle raising, in particular—but only when private enterprise ousted the State did these pursuits progress spontaneously or adequately.

Fresh mutton became available in 1793 through the trading of the officers of the New South Wales Corps. and two of these, in 1797, imported Spanish sheep from “the Cape” to resell—but the State refused them twice. They then sold to other officers of the Corps (Foveaux, Lt. John Macarthur, and the Rev. Chaplain Marsden), who crossed them with the hairy sheep that had, until then, been the only kind in Australia, and began wool growing. State pigs, goats, etc.. dwindled in number, and finally the first epoch ended with private enterprise replacing what Rogers called, correctly,

State socialism—the State control of the production, distribution and exchange of wealth.

The officers of the New South Wales Corps played openly for their own hand, granting each other large plots of land that had been proved good, and assigning to their areas the best of the convicts, and other accessible facilities.

During the first fifty years of the “Colony of New South Wales” the rule was “devil take the hindmost.” The Army Officers of the New South Wales Corps were attracted to the Colony largely by the desire to make a fortune quickly. Stories of vast riches acquired in a couple of years repeatedly came back from India and China: why might not equal opulence be acquired in the new settlement in New Holland?

If they had desired renown or glory a world at war was wide open to them—the world war sparked off by the ambition of Napoleon kept France and England at each other’s throats almost continuously from 1793 to 1815, when Waterloo wrote “finis” to the French fantasy of world empire. But they preferred in those years to exploit the new land for their own advantage.

Phillip left—worn out by worries—in 1792, and the administratorship fell almost automatically into the hands of the Commander of the N.S.W. Corps, Major Grose, who with his successor Paterson represented autocratic authority for two years and nine months—a period of increasing disaster in a social sense. The entire community was debauched. Degradation by drink, corruption, and general iniquity required years to mitigate.

Phillip had imposed restrictions on the distribution of spirits (all lumped under the term “rum”), for he well knew what one might expect from free access to raw liquor by a convict population. But Grose gave the greatest freedom to its importation, distillation, distribution and sale and, in the hands of his officers, it became the curse of the Colony. The ease with which officers acquired land and convict labour to work it, killed work for public purposes and, indeed, virtually none was done after Phillip left. The Government “fed and clothed the convicts, the officers had their labour for nothing, and the Government purchased the commodities they produced by it, at prices fixed by the same officers.” They secured also a monopoly in spirits and other goods imported, and hugely increased retail prices for their own gain. The House of Commons Committee on Transportation, sitting in 1812, asked a witness on oath: “Do the majority of the officers to whom the Government of the Colony is entrusted, embark in trade?” He answered: “All, to a man!—it consists first of all of monopoly; then of extortion; it includes all the necessaries of life which are brought to the colony.” In 1797 they combined to keep prices up and neither to underbuy nor undersell each other. Macarthur, who was appointed inspector of public works (1793-1796), guarded the interests of the State, says Rogers acidly, as a cat guards cream!

Mrs. John Macarthur blandly explained: “The officers in the colony, with a few others possessed of money or credit in England, unite together and purchase the cargoes of such vessels as repair to this country from various quarters. Two or more are chosen to bargain for the cargo offered for sale, which is then divided among them in proportion to the amount of their subscriptions.”

As a corollary to this corrupt state of affairs, Grose suppressed the civil magistracy and placed the entire administration of “justice” (so-called) in the hands of the military officers.

When, after his assumption of office, the second Governor, Captain Hunter, insisted on the restoration of the justices to their rightful functions, insult and annoyance were visited upon them to the verge of tolerance, so that he reported to the Secretary for State that “for these shameful and unpardonable purposes the most improper means which a mischievously fertile imagination, a malicious, restless and vindictive disposition could invent” had been employed. Ernest Scott, from whom much of the above is paraphrased, says that Grose frankly disliked all in the community whom he could not pamper as soldiers or control as convicts; and he spoke testily also of having been “much plagued with the people who become settlers.”

These military jackals grew strong enough in time to overthrow the power they were commissioned to support.

The Second Period

In the second period (1801-1810), Australian colonisation became popular and optimistic because the Napoleonic wars had made Sydney a naval and commercial centre, and whaling, seal-hunting, and coal-mining for replenishing the greatly increased number of ships calling, flourished. Timber was in great demand, and was exported to England and elsewhere; sandalwood was collected in Fiji and exported also, and, because of the fear of French competition, colonies were founded, as previously mentioned, at Hobart, Port Phillip, and Launceston. These, naturally, increased the demand for general supplies.

In 1800 the first customs duty, the first rates, and the first volunteer force were raised!

Whaling and sealing contribute most astonishing chapters essential to the story of early settlement in Australia—chapters almost entirely forgotten. From the Queensland shores each year the procession of whales up the coast and down again is as regular as the seasons themselves, though there are no longer the vast numbers that once sported in these seas. Pioneer settlement in Bass Straits, Tasmania.
and Victoria began with the adventurous sailors who set up their little stations along their shores and on strategically located islands. Lawless men—runaway convicts and ticket-of-leave men, and later more and more of the scum of the world from North and South America—gradually degraded the traffic, which became one of the most inefficient and insensate of operations and finally destroyed itself in the extravagant mass slaughter and extermination of its prey.

(The colossal slaughter may be gauged from the fact that, in 1804, one American vessel, the "Union," alone, obtained 600,000 skins worth from 6/- to 14/- apiece, when the shilling had a very much higher value than it has to-day.)

The aboriginals fared as badly as the seals at the hands of the sealers. Without compunction they were shot like rabbits and their women were abducted and "domesticated" at the camps. American sealers were quite the most irresponsible and despicable of these characters, one of whom, Amaro Delano, captain of the "Perseverance," was a source of continual mischief. When, ultimately, his misdemeanours became unbearable even among that base community, he absconded with his ship to Chile taking with him seventeen escaped convicts.

In 1825 "Van Diemen's Land" (Tasmania) was separated off as the first daughter colony, and the law was capable of better enforcement, but the effects of unrestrained and unpunished violence undoubtedly had an effect on all classes and were factors in the rise of the "bushrangers"—so sternly dealt with by Governor Arthur—and also, in the conditions that led to the "Black Drive." By 1830 the scarcity of seals sounded the death knell of what might have remained a most profitable industry for very many years. It was succeeded to a minor degree by the exploitation of mutton-bird oil.

Whaling was an important industry for many years and should still be so. In Australia it was greatly hindered by the disability imposed by an Act of George III that prevented operations north of the equator or east of 51° E. longitude, in the supposed interests of the powerful East India Company. Ultimately the boundary for South Sea whaling was extended eastwards to between 123° and 180° E. longitude.

The trade continued until, after a gradual decline till 1860, it ceased when the schools of whales had been annihilated or driven away.

Governor King, in the early days of the whaling and sealing operations, repeatedly deplored the unfair handicaps under which Australians and law-abiding citizens generally suffered in comparison with foreigners—but without result.

Whaling and sealing employed 300 Australian ex-convicts in 1806. Whales could only be sold in London or locally until 1813 and seals only locally till 1819, after which the East Indian monopoly was abolished, except as to trade with China, and in tea—exceptions which persisted till 1834.

The same handicap hindered trade in timber ("our only staple" said Governor King in 1803) and sandalwood from Fiji, about which the East India Company was immovable. "Strange to say," wrote King, "every means is taken to throw that object into the hands of the Americans." The principal trade in all these things did indeed, remain in American hands or in polyglot vessels of all kinds under "bucko" American skippers or brutal mates, with "pressed" crews gleaned from the seaside "dives" of East Asia and the west coast of the Americas.

As law and order were slowly established and forced ever more determinedly upon the community, the scum was squeezed to the edges and appeared in the unprotected island groups of the Pacific, where, in fact, its evil influence was so pronounced that it justified the establishment of "spheres of protection" that soon stimulated a race for area between Great Britain and reviving France. Ultimately the antisocial and criminal elements found a haven for their activities only in the most remote outposts; or a new opportunity in the "blackbirding" of the middle of the century.

The Land Seekers

These facts may seem irrelevant to Queensland's history but, in fact, they had a definite bearing upon it. More directly, it was affected by the growing demand for land.

There had begun to be a considerable amount of settlement both in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land by ex-convicts. In 1803 there were (including officers) 328 free settlers in New South Wales, of whom nine-tenths had been convicts; these were especially the farmers and corn growers of the Hawkesbury River area.

At the outset, and for twenty-five years, the Blue Mountains walled the Sydney area in, and as grants used up the available area, land soon became a crying need. The naval captains, indeed, regarded the mountains 40 to 140 miles west of the coast as a useful wall to
keep their prisoners from straying, rather than as a strangling barrier to be broken for the sake of survival. They were sea men, the ocean was their element, and they clung to its shores. Both Phillip and Hunter, it is true, had made some personal trips of exploration and had authorised others. In 1789 Lieut. Dawes had failed to cross the mountains; Captain William Paterson in 1793 had attempted to find a passage with a party of Scottish Highlanders; in 1794 Henry Hacking made an attempt; in 1796 Surgeon George Bass, of Bass Strait fame, took rope ladders and grappling irons to storm the wall, but failed. When, however, in 1799, Wilson, a convict, struck southwest across the high Mittagong tableland and reached what was later to be called the Lachlan River, Governor Hunter was embarrassed by the discovery and refused to make any use or public advertisement of it.

In 1804 George Cayley, a man of great physical strength and enthusiasm, with excellent equipment and some of the strongest men in the colony to assist him, “had to admit he was beaten,” and Governor King asserted that to persevere in the endeavour to cross “such a confused and barren assemblage of mountains, with impassable chasms between, would be as chimerical as useless!”

The earlier explorers (except Wilson) had tried to make their way up the valleys of the Grose and Nattai, and had found themselves face to face with cliffs towering above them, or had come to the edge of cliffs with sheer drops far below them and no forward way.

But there was, of course, a way, and it was found during Lachlan Macquarie’s regime.

In 1813 Gregory Blaxland, a capitalist immigrant, Lawson, a lieutenant of the veteran company, and W. C. Wentworth, a colonial-born young man who was to figure largely in the early life of the country, went straight up the side of the ridge overhanging Penrith and deliberately kept along the top of the hills, as directly west as they could go, avoiding every gully, and so piercing the heart of the tableland itself. After seventeen days they found themselves on the point of Mount York looking down on a beautiful grassy valley, and the next day made their camp, amid grass three feet high, on the Lett. Having pushed on to the hill now called Mt. Blaxland, they returned with the news to Sydney, to the delight of Macquarie. G. W. Evans, a Government surveyor, was instructed to retrace and extend their journey and to report his observations. He pushed on past Mt. Blaxland over the range, down the Fish River, across the magnificent Bathurst Plains, and discovered the Macquarie River; and, in a second trip, found another large river, the Lachlan. A first road over the range was laid out in excitement and enthusiasm; the Governor and his wife rode across, and the township of Bathurst was ceremoniously established—the first inland town in Australia. It was an epoch-making event.

Hardly was the road opened before graziers and their flocks poured into the new rich area. It was a story that was to be repeated constantly for two or three generations.

In 1817-18 Surveyor John Oxley traced the Lachlan and the Macquarie Rivers inland for 300 miles and, indeed, until both—widely separated now—seemed to enter the border swamps of the “inland sea” with which explorers were still obsessed. On the way back he crossed the mountain barrier between the Macquarie and the easterly coastal streams; observed Liverpool Plains near Tamworth; discovered the Conadilly and Peel Rivers (but not the Namoi, which receives them both); explored the Hastings River and Port Macquarie (colonised by convicts in 1820), and returned. “Oxley’s tours,” continues Rogers, “are the first of those heroic inland tours which redeem Australian history from its monotony, and surround it with the halo of romance.”

It took over twenty years, however, to discover that the Lachlan and the Macquarie, with a vast network of auxiliaries and other watercourses, drained the vast basin of the Murray, which with its greatest tributary, the Darling, is one of the great water-systems of the world.

Oxley and many others were baffled and intrigued by experiences like those of his exploration of the Lachlan. As Ernest Scott says, he followed

ut windings over a dead level plain, through shallow reedy lagoons, and finally to a point where the river became a succession of stagnant pools leading to a mere damp depression in the earth . . . Oxley had, in fact, made an astonished acquaintance with that strange phenomenon of Australia, where Nature starts many a fine river but gives it no firm channel wherein to flow, so that the water evaporates from the intense heat of the plains, or percolates into the earth and perhaps helps to fill those subterranean cauldrons of rock which modern pastoralists have learnt to tap with artesian bores.”

It was the same with the Macquarie, which, too, abruptly disappeared, after 150 miles.

But one immediate fact emerged—there was a vast, almost an illimitable expanse of good grazing and pastoral country for 500 miles west of Sydney, and north and north-west, too!

The Third Period

This fact changed the whole outlook and policy of the home government and also of the local administration. The “penal colony”

* William Cox, J.P., built the road with convict labour in six months—a remarkable feat. He was rewarded by a grant of land near Bathurst.
began to be submerged by the “great wool-growing free settlement,”
and settlement in Australia, indeed, became a privilege; it was no
longer regarded as relegation to a place of exile and punishment.
Inland exploration began to be seen as a necessary prelude to
deliberate colonisation; it was, in effect, a search for suitable grazing
and pastoral areas; and its success had unexpected results. It intro-
duced the nomadic and the absentee-owner phases, for example, that
were, together, to colour and dominate the pastoral industry for
the next generation and more; it brought in the “squatter,” the
“immigrant,” and the “gentleman settler” in unexpected numbers;
and it led to the formation of mammoth companies, managed from
halfway across the world.

The New South Wales Corps and its monopolists had scorned
and obstructed the free settlers; even Macquarie frankly disliked them
almost as much as Grose. Nevertheless, the immigrant ship began to
be as regular a visitant as the convict transport. Newspapers in
England were enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by the
new, vast, empty continent, where a few pounds would put a man,
willing to work, on the way to the ownership of a broader stretch
of acres than his squire owned in the mother country.

The flood of immigrants produced important social changes. It
initiated the struggle between the squattocracy on the one hand, and
the “emancipists” and “immigrants” on the other. It was inevitable,
moreover, that the avarice and corruption of the “aristocracy” of
the Colony, the immunity of the foreign whalers and sealers from
punishment, the general loosening of discipline and of any existing
restriction on decency, should affect colonist and convict both. The
undertones of convictism rose murky to cloud these more promising
days.

Coote in his “History of Queensland,” Vol. 1, p. 15, eloquently
wrote:

“To a great extent the history of one penal settlement is the
history of all penal settlements. The line of demarcation between
keeper and criminal was strong and distinct, and it became gradually
a settled thing that, whether a convict might or might not be
occasionally right, the master could never be wrong. The result was
natural. The consciousness of impunity to the governor, and of
degradation in the governed, could not but tend to lessen the care
with which authority was exercised, and the perception of just cause
for its exertion. . . . Every repetition of offence and its consequent
suffering, not only widened the distance between the judge and the
offender, but deadened the sense of justice and appreciation of guilt;
and thus by insensible degrees a hardness of feeling has been found to
spring up in all these settlements, equally in the gaoler, as in the
prisoners. They became ‘stern to inflict and stubborn to endure,’
without much reference to anything but facility of infliction and
capacity of endurance. The authorities drifted into cruelty, and the
criminals deepened in crime.”

Granting this—and it is well confirmed—it can be accepted that it
was obviously desirable to make the growing centres of population
as free as possible from the worst types of convicts; it was necessary
to find remote areas where “bad cases” might be handled adequately
without offending the public eye, and this was increasingly difficult
since the pressure for good sheep land intensified constantly.

From an official point of view, the chronic administrative difficulty
of space for penal purposes soon reached crisis point; the existing
establishments of the Government of New South Wales proved
plainly inadequate to the demands created by the influx of crowded
criminal ships from the home country. It was actually that factor
that led to a new interest in what was to become Queensland.

The discoveries of Flinders twenty-one years before—especially
those of Port Curtis and Moreton Bay—were reviewed in the hope
of finding a suitable spot well north of Sydney for a new penal
depot—somewhere to hide away the worst aspects of the convict
system in a day when it was beginning to weaken as a method of
disposing of convicted offenders, and moreover, when its very
existence was splitting the population on its first rabid social issue.
This was not only the beginning of Queensland, it was to be the
beginning of responsible government; of civic and social conscious-
ness, and of the movement for the establishment of separate self-
governing colonies.