

CHAPTER IV LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

BEFORE South Australia was colonised there were a few white settlers upon its shores. They lived on Kangaroo Island. It was so called by Captain Flinders, who discovered it in 1802. At that time the island was uninhabited.

About seventeen years after Flinders' visit there were at least two white men upon Kangaroo Island. How they got there we are not in a position to state. They were either escaped convicts from some of the older settlements, or runaway sailors. In course of time these were joined by others. Wild men they were – hard as the rocks; salt as the sea. Away from the restraints of civilisation they led a lawless life. The conscience was seared; the spiritual instincts blunted. Apparently, they had no higher ambition in life than to gratify their material instincts. In a spiritual sense they must have descended almost to the level of the kangaroos. Their time was spent in whaling, sealing, and wallaby hunting. Sometimes they made a trip to the mainland and stole some of the blacks. On of the early emigrants, who came by the *Africane* in 1836, has left on record a description of one of these marauders. She says: "We next proceeded around the island, and as we entered Nepean Bay the flag was hoisted and two guns fired to announce our approach. A boat, in which was a gentleman of the name of Samuel Stephens (who came out in the *Duke of York*) came off, rowed by four men, one of whom was Nathaniel Thomas, and had been resident on the island many years, but his appearance, I thought, was more like that of a savage than an Englishman. This man, by some mischance, fell overboard, and, as the tide was running strong at the time, he was carried some distance from the vessel before assistance could be rendered, and, although he could swim well enough, he was watched by those on board with considerable anxiety on account of the sharks, which were known to be numerous. An oar, however, was thrown to him, on which he got astride till the boat reached him; and when he was again on the deck he shook himself like a dog does when just out of the water, and took no more notice of the matter."¹

Before the year 1836 these white buccaneers had a whole island to themselves. They were "monarchs of all they surveyed," their right "there was none to dispute." But a change was coming.

In 1836 a vessel hove in sight. We can imagine how curiously some of the natives on the mainland may have watched her as she mysteriously tacked along the coast of Kangaroo Island, making for Nepean Bay. At length she dropped anchor. This was on the 29th of July 1836. It was the *Duke of York*, commanded by Captain R.G. Morgan. She had brought the first contingent of emigrants to the new land. In addition to officers and sailors (who went back with the ship) there were thirteen passengers on board: nine adults and four children. As this event will ever have historical value, we give the names of the passengers: Mr. Samuel Stephens (first manager of the South Australian Company); Mr. Thomas Hudson Beare, Mrs. Lucy Ann Beare, and the following four children – Lucy, Arabella, Elizabeth, and William L. Beare; also Charlotte Hudson Beare (afterwards Mrs. Samuel Stephens); and Messrs. Thomas Mitchell, Charles Powel, D.H. Schreyvogel, William West, and C. Neall. These were the pioneer settlers in South Australia – the first contingent of sinewy men and women who were to make "the parched ground a pool," and the "wilderness blossom as a rose."

Jetties, of course, there were none. The passengers would be carried "pick-a-back" by the sailors, or wade through the surf to the shore. There seems to have been some competition amongst the passengers of the *Duke of York* as to who should be the first to put foot on South Australian soil. The Captain soon settled the question. The

¹ Diary of Mrs. Robt. Thomas, wife of first proprietor of *South Australian Register*.

boat was launched. "Baby Beare" was put on board. She was rowed to the beach. Amid the cheers of the emigrants one of the sailors carried her through the surf, and planted her feet on the shore.

What was the first act of the settlers on reaching shore? To go on an exploring expedition? To attend to their material wants? No. To give thanks to God. There was neither ordained preacher nor temple made with hands. In the great temple of nature, under the blue vault of heaven, they returned thanks for the mercies of the voyage. Is it not a picture worthy of the poet's muse or the painter's brush? A little band of men and women – pioneer settlers, nation builders – met on the shores of a country practically unknown. Before them is the ocean. Riding at anchor in Nepean Bay is the vessel in which they have sailed. Behind is the dense scrub of Kangaroo Island. Away in the distance the mainland, on which they will ultimately dwell. Under foot the beach of Nepean Bay. Captain Morgan stands up. The emigrants cluster around him. Heads are bowed and hearts uplifted while the Captain conducts a short service, concluding with extempore prayer. Are not these the "deeds that have won the empire"? the memory of which should never die.

After spending a few hours on shore the emigrants returned to the vessel. Here they spent the night. Next day they made preparations to build huts, and pitched their tents. It was on Kangaroo Island that the first settlement was to be formed. Such were the instructions that the South Australian Company gave to Samuel Stephens. Shops were to be erected, and cottages for shepherds and herdsmen built. This proved to be a mistake, as further on we shall see.

What a strange experience the first emigrants' must have been! How very unreal! Were they awake, or did they dream? Had they really left the Old Land? Were their loved ones the other side of the world? What a sense of loneliness at times must have come over them! They had lived in a land of villages and towns; a land where myriads hurried through the streets. Here neither street, village, nor town could be seen. It was an empty land. No street since creation had been formed, and no city built. Save the members of their own community, and a few half-savage whalers and sealers, no white face was to be seen. They had been accustomed to the roar of traffic; here, save the chatter of the birds, the sigh of the wind, or the sough of the ocean, no sounds could be heard. The solitude at times must have been oppressive; the silence intense. On the one hand, far as the eye could reach, there was interminable scrub; on the other, the trackless sea.

But there were gleams of sunshine amid the gloom. They were in a new world. Here were strange fruits and flowers, and trees that never shed their leaves. Here were peculiar insects and gaily-dressed birds. The warble of the magpie made glad the heart, and the weird laugh of the jackass first caused alarm, and then provoked a smile. They saw the wallaby hopping in the scrub; the emu running along with her chicks; and, peradventure, the well-conditioned wombat harrying to his hole. The heart danced with delight at the sight of a sail. Ere long there was the joy of receiving a letter from "home." How firmly the precious missive would be grasped! The hand would tremble and the heart beat fast as the fingers tore away the seal. Ah! there was the old familiar hand, but changed. The letter was blotched and the writing blurred. Here and there was a stain. What did it mean? A tear – a soul's travail – the liquified love of a father's or mother's heart. How fast the emigrant's eye would fly over the words till the end was reached! The nerves were steadier now. The reader would begin again. This time the eye would linger over the sentences whilst the soul listened with delight to the music of a familiar voice, and gazed in ecstasy upon a sweet but intangible face. But duty calls. The log fire must be renewed; the kettle must be hung. The letter is folded up, only to be again and again unfolded and re-read. At night the emigrant dreams. Space is annihilated. He or she is in Old England now. The snow is falling. A little cottage

appears in view. There is the garden in which the honeysuckle and jessamine grow. A dear old figure is standing at the gate. A wild blast comes sweeping by. The emigrant awakes. Ah! it was only a dream – a beautiful creation shattered by the scream of an excited parrot or the howl of a hungry dingo. The soul may have seen Old England, but the body is in a tent or reed-hut on the shores of an Australian bay.

Shortly after the arrival of the *Duke of York* the *Lady Mary Pelham* dropped anchor in Nepean Bay. There were six passengers on board, and twenty-three officers and men. She was soon followed by the *John Pirie*, laden with stores, carrying fourteen passengers and fourteen officers and men. All these vessels belonged to the South Australian Company. It was private enterprise that fitted them up and sent them out. No emigrant vessel despatched by the Government Commissioners had yet arrived. The *Cygnets* was the first to set sail, followed by the *Rapid*, having on board the Surveyor-General, Colonel Light.

There were two questions exercising the emigrants' minds. One was –

WHERE WILL THE CITY BE BUILT?

Until this question was settled nothing definite could be done. It was one in which the people had no direct voice. Sole power was vested in Colonel Light. In the way of surveying the country, of fixing the site, nothing could be decided until he came.

It was on the 19th of August 1836 that the *Rapid* rode into Nepean Bay. At once the Colonel set to work. Kangaroo Island, as a suitable place for settlement, was condemned. The land was poor. Port Lincoln could not be recommended. The waterway was not sufficiently safe. Much was to be held in favour of Holdfast Bay. The Colonel's position was a most responsible one. It was not a temporary question that he had to settle, but one the effect of which was to continue for all time. It was not for the present generation that he had to decide, but for generations unborn. Posterity must either applaud or condemn.

In fixing the site of the city several things had to be taken into consideration. So far as a mere basis on which to build is concerned, such could easily be found. It was not so easy to find a suitable port, or a stream of water from which the inhabitants could drink. It was these difficulties that Colonel Light had to face. For some time he could neither find suitable port nor stream. After a careful examination of the coast both these difficulties were met. An arm of the sea was discovered running several miles inland, offering an admirable shelter for ships. Here the Colonel decided to fix his port. Farther inland a fresh-water river had been found, larger than any yet seen. On the banks of this stream he decided that the city should be built.

Four months had passed away since Colonel Light had begun his work. During that time several emigrant ships had arrived. As Kangaroo Island had been condemned, most of the passengers were landed at Holdfast Bay. On Christmas Day, 1836, there must have been about three hundred settlers on South Australian soil.

To every community there must be a head. It seems to be a necessity of our nature that there should be some embodiment of law and order, and in every social organism there is something lacking until that necessity is met. It was so in the experience of the early emigrants. The site for the city had been fixed, but the Governor had not yet arrived. How anxiously they looked for his advent!

WHEN WILL THE GOVERNOR COME?

would be an oft-repeated question. Frequently the eyes of the emigrant scanned the ocean. What was the reason of the delay? At length another sail hove in sight. It was the long-expected and anxiously-looked for H.M.S. *Buffalo*. It had the Governor on board, the Resident Commissioner, J.H. Fisher, and the Colonial Chaplain, the Rev. C.B. Howard. What excitement there must have been amongst the emigrants! What demonstrations of joy! Rush-huts and tents would be vacated. Down the emigrants would run, young and old, to the edge of the water. What a motley assemblage! The

tall hat would be in evidence, so would the smock-frock and gaiters. The Governor and party would either have to submit to the orthodox style of transhipment – “pick-a-back” – or take off boots and socks, and wade through the water. The position may not have been a very dignified one, but necessity knows no law, and is no respecter of persons. The Governor was received by the leading men of the small community. There was a preliminary meeting in the tent of Robert Gouger, Colonial Secretary. An adjournment was then made to a large gum-tree. The Proclamation was read! The British flag unfurled! A royal salute was fired! The air rang with hurrahs! A cold lunch, consisting chiefly of cold pork and a ham, was served up in a very primitive style. The Governor mounted a chair, and gave the first toast, “The King,” which was received with “three times three.” The national anthem followed. Other toasts were given. “Rule, Britannia” was sung. The emigrants were well-nigh wild with joy, and the shades of evening brought to a close the most exciting day (save the day of their landing) that they had seen. Is it any wonder that the children of the first emigrants, to this day, on the anniversary of the Colony, travel to Holdfast Bay in tens of thousands, where patriotic speeches are still delivered, old colonists are honoured, and royal salutes fired?

In the Governor’s Proclamation the spirit in which English people set about the work of colonisation, and the basis on which they build, are to be seen: -

In announcing to the colonists of His Majesty’s province of South Australia, the establishment of the Government, I hereby call upon them to conduct themselves, on all occasions, with order and quietness, duly to respect the laws, and, by a course of industry and sobriety, by the practice of sound morality, and a strict observance of the ordinances of religion, to prove themselves worthy to be the founders of a great and free Colony.

The Proclamation also stated that the Governor would take every lawful means to secure to the Aborigines all the rights of British subjects.

The foundations were now well and truly laid. How the superstructure was reared we must leave for the next chapter.