COLONIAL DISSENTERS: The Congregationalist Settlement of Encounter Bay and Welsh Calvinistic Methodists of Warrnambool

Introduction

Good afternoon,

Thank you, Ray, for your welcome. May I add to your introduction. I am a third generation Australian on both sides. All my grandparents were born in Victoria or South Australia. They were nearly all children of pioneers - the Wilsons and Brisbanes of Berwick, the Hydes and Thomlinsons of Encounter Bay and the Davies and Roberts of Warrnambool. When I thought about it, I realised that these people were all Dissenters - that is none of them belonged to the Established Church. They were Protestants and some of them we would describe as wowsers.

The nineteenth century was a time when religion mattered to almost everyone. Immigrants to Australia were no exceptions. They had probably prayed long and hard as they encountered foul weather on the voyage. Most brought their own brand of Christianity and religious prejudices to shore.

We live in a country that has no Established Church - that is one that is legally recognised (and sometimes financed) by the State as an official national institution. Our English, Welsh and even Irish ancestors who had not emigrated before the mid-19th century did, however, live under the control of the Church of England.

After the Reformation and Henry VIII's break with Rome, Roman Catholics or Protestant non-conformists - in fact anyone who belonged to a denomination other than the Church of England - were either actively persecuted for their faith or suffered some sort of discrimination. Of course, the whole history of Christianity is littered with stories of martyrs, but the era of colonization presented the Dissenters with greater possibilities of escape.

The Evangelical movement of the 18th century was the inspiration for a number of great preachers, particularly John Wesley and George Whitefield. From them came the Methodist, Congregational and other Non-conformist or Dissenting denominations. John Bunyan's pilgrim in his book "Pilgrim's Progress" is an excellent portrait of the typical Dissenter or Evangelical - the lonely man, with a burden of sin on his back and a Bible in his hand, struggling to reach salvation.

England and Wales were divided up into parishes and everyone who lived in a particular parish was under the control of the vicar. Until 1836 tithes - a tenth of all produce - were given to the local Anglican parson either in kind or in money. (In Scotland the minister of the Established Presbyterian church also received tithes.) In England and Wales, until that year, 1836, the vicar was the only licensed marriage celebrant - so all marriages had to take place in a parish church. Even after that time couples, who belonged to Catholic or Non-Conformist churches, still tended to marry in the parish church for fear of being found not to be legally married. Burial grounds were also attached to parish churches so that generations of Dissenters were laid to rest in the graveyard of the church that they did not attend and whose doctrine they did not support.

Until British schools were set up in England and later in Wales, education was also controlled by the Established Church. Many Dissenters were reluctant to send their children to these Church of England schools lest they be turned into good little members of the Church of England.

Only members of the Established Church could attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities. The founding of London University in 1827 opened up university education to students who did not belong to the Established church. Only communicant members of the Established Church could hold public office or a military commission.

Despite all this probably the most common reason for emigration was, even amongst Dissenters, to seek a better life - for themselves or for their children. Even Pastor Ridgway William Newland (picture of young Newland in ecclesiastical robe) who, in 1828, set out for South Australia to find a religious settlement, did not leave England for purely religious reasons. He also dreamt of a more prosperous and healthier life for his children. Like nearly everyone of their era the Newlands had experienced a number of deaths in their family. Newland's first wife died and so did two of their children. They lived in Hanley, Stoke- on-Trent, one of the Pottery towns in Staffordshire. Stoke- on-Trent is approximately halfway between Birmingham and Manchester. (Map) In the early 19th century Hanley was not a healthy place in which to live - especially during 1832 when it was hit by a cholera epidemic caused by polluted water.

The northern industrial towns of England, largely disregarded by the Established Church, were a fertile mission field for George Whitefield and John Wesley, and following them for Dissenting ministers and evangelists. By 1838 the Reverend Ridgway William Newland had been in charge of the Congregational church in Hanley for 22 years. (Picture of Newland in 1830).

Besides his ecclesiastical work he farmed a smallholding. This farming experience was to prove most valuable.

When he decided to leave for the colonies Newland was no longer a young man. He was 48, had married a second wife, Martha, who was a classical, Hebrew and French scholar. They had a family of eight surviving children aged from one to 18 years of age.

In early December 1838 Newland purchased 560 acres in the colony of South Australia from the Colonisation Commissioners at 20 shillings an acre: by the end of the month the Newlands were bound for South Australia on the Sir Charles Forbes, a barque of 400 tons. The ship carried 200 passengers, 34 of whom were members of the Newland's party. Pastor and Mrs Newland came well prepared - with a variety of useful employees including a blacksmith, a stonemason, three ploughmen and their families, every kind of farm implement, tents, building materials and, of course, their furniture. They were prepared to be self-sufficient so they brought everything that they could think of including a cow and a large supply of chamber pots! When they reached Adelaide they found most things actually were available there and they added to their livestock.

It is thought that Newland decided to sail around the coast to Encounter Bay (Maps) because there already was a successful Congregational minister in Adelaide. Another reason may have been that Governor Hindmarsh had purchased land at Encounter Bay and planned public works for the area. It was considered as a site for the capital of the colony.

In 1838 Encounter Bay was a whaling station. It was situated near the mouth of the Murray River. (Whaling Station) Its name may not be familiar to you as the Encounter Bay settlement has been swallowed up the neighbouring seaside town of Victor Harbor. The bay was called Encounter Bay to commemorate the meeting - or encounter - between Flinders and the French explorer, Baudin, in 1802. Newland expected not only to farm in the district but also to establish and minister to a Congregational church.

As with most pioneering families the establishment of a productive farm (Encounter Bay — G.F. Angas, 1846) was the first priority and the Newlands lived in tents for more than a year. George French Angas' coloured lithograph, dated 1846, shows the Newlands' farm, 'Yilki', in the centre background. (Photo of site) This is a recent photo taken near the site. The first chapel or Tabernacle was built in 1846. (Tabernacle) A burying ground surrounded the Tabernacle. In 1850 the church was officially formed when, according to church records, "eight Christian people gave themselves to the Lord and to each other and called Mr Newland to the Pastorate." By that time Newland had been ministering for eleven years to a scattered flock, spread out across the eastern side of the peninsular. (Map showing settlements) Travel was difficult - especially after dark. Roads and bridges had yet to be constructed. (Bridge with date)

Newland's flock was a mixed lot. Of the founding members of the Encounter Bay Tabernacle congregation only four were Congregationalists - or Independents, as they were also known. Three were Baptists and one an Episcopalian. Unlike their Pastor they were all young people.

Newland's other congregations, in Port Elliot or Goolwa or Middleton, who had been meeting in farmhouses, were also from a variety of Protestant backgrounds. Perhaps this is why strict rules of membership were laid down. Those who attended services and paid pew rents were not automatically admitted to membership. A candidate must be proposed by a member and interviewed by two members to make sure that he or she truly agreed with the doctrine of the church and would take on the responsibility of being a member. (Congregationalists)

Not all who applied for membership were admitted. Isaac Forster's proposed membership was deferred when it was discovered that his horse had run at the Port Elliot races. His excuse was that "being on the course on necessary business he was surprised into the sin of allowing his horse to run." Although horseracing was frowned on strong drink in moderation was tolerated. Not all of Newland's fellow ministers would have agreed with him.

Although "Free Christian dissension" was allowed - if it was first mentioned to the Pastor and the Deacons it was a brave soul who would disagree with Newland or a deacon. In the tiny communities where the church was the centre of worship and social life few would dare to risk ostracism by independent thought. When my mother, Gene Ballantyne, was researching Newland's ministry in Encounter Bay she came across an entry concerning Dorothy Robinson, who had adopted Gene's grandmother, Mary Thomlinson. Mary's parents had sailed with the Robinsons from England to Launceston but, when his wife died, Mary's father gave his baby into the care of Dorothy and Ezra Robinson. He remained in Tasmania while Ezra and Dorothy Robinson sailed on to Encounter Bay. (Photo of Gene and her siblings with their mother, Helena Hyde, Mary Thomlinson's daughter)

Ezra and Dorothy Robinson were committed members of the Encounter Bay Tabernacle. Ezra was in charge of the grounds and the fabric of the building and, as treasurer, collected subscriptions - or pew rents - as well as fees for funerals. His wife was responsible for "talking with females who may attend the service but who are not members". Presumably this was to be more than idle chit-chat.

In 1854 a prominent church member - one of the original settlers who had sailed with Newland in 1838 - informed against Dorothy Robinson for some unspecified wrongdoing. He refused to say what it was. Although the informant was, not long afterwards, charged with stealing cattle and resigned from the congregation, Dorothy Robinson's resignation was accepted.

For seven long years, while her husband fulfilled his duties first as Treasurer and later as deacon, his wife was excluded from the select little inner circle of the church. Each Sunday she would have attended worship and (all age) Sunday School as an outsider. It was not until 1862 that she was

reinstated as a member. Although her daughter, Mary Thomlinson, must have known of the disgrace in the family, no word was handed down to younger generations. It was left for my mother to find, a century later, the occurrence in the church minutes. (Graves of pioneers)

Pastor Newland was killed in an accident in 1864 when he was travelling in the mail cart, and it overturned. He was greatly mourned as pastor and as the founding father of the district. He had formed nine congregations in the area (Map showing congregations) and for over two decades, faithfully preached and ministered to them.

Newland was a charismatic man and his influence spread far beyond the confines of his church. (Newland in old age) He was a successful farmer, businessman, Chairman of the District Council, which he founded, and a Justice of the Peace - an office that really meant something in those days. Joyce Branson, the author of "Ridgway William Newland, Pioneer Pastor of the South" says of him: Newland had a profound influence for good on the early religious, social and political life of the community." (Newland memorial, Encounter Bay Cemetery)

Although the strict little church communities of Encounter Bay bore similarities to the 17th century New England colonies of America it was the more tolerant New England colonies of Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Connecticut that they resembled. Newland maintained good relationships with people of all denominations. In his lifetime the only church buildings of the area were his Tabernacles. After Newland's death Anglican and Roman Catholic churches were built and two of the Congregational churches in the district combined with the Wesleyans. The Encounter Bay enterprise succeeded largely because of the able and respected leadership of Pastor Newland. The Newland Uniting Church (Picture of Newland church) in Victor Harbor stands as a lasting memorial to the inspiration and dedication of its founder. (Wedding at Newland Memorial Ch.)

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The Welsh pioneers in the Warrnambool district found themselves in a far more typical colonial settlement than those in Encounter Bay.

Members of the Welsh Calvinist Methodist church, the Welsh who came to Warrnambool were mainly from the island of Anglesey (Map) in North Wales. Calvinistic Methodism, or Welsh Presbyterianism, originating in Wales in the mid-18th century, is considered to be the only denomination distinctly Welsh in origin. Adherents believe in "double predestination". The doctrine of Predestination (Summary of Predestination) is that God decided at the beginning of time who would go to heaven and who would not. Those who believe in "Double Predestination" (Summary of Double Predestination) believe that God gives us Free Will to accept or reject his way. Calvinistic Methodism had its roots in the Evangelical movement, as did Wesleyan Methodism but, while John Wesley believed that anyone could be saved, others like Howell Harris, who is looked upon as the founder of the Welsh church, combined the doctrine of Predestination with that of Free Will - hence "double predestination". (Summary of Calvinistic-Methodism) In the 18th century Calvinistic Methodist preachers and members were persecuted on the mainland of Wales and many found sanctuary in the island of Anglesey.

As in England, Dissenters in Wales suffered discrimination with the added problem of language. In Wales schools were also run by the Established Church, in English, and on Sundays the pupils were expected to worship in the parish church. This put non-conformist families in a very difficult position. The thought of not worshipping in chapel as a family and of their children being taught the Anglican faith was abhorrent to families who belonged to the Calvinistic Methodist church. On the other hand, the Welsh regarded education very highly. It was a dilemma.

Although their religion was very important to the Welsh pioneers in Warrnambool it was not the reason for their emigration. In fact, if they emigrated there was little chance of remaining within the faith. Although it was the custom to present departing emigrants with Welsh Bibles, my great grandfather, John Davies, (picture of John Davies) brought with him a copy of the Church of England prayer book in Welsh because, being a British colony, his mother thought that he would be most likely to find a nearby Anglican church. The first Welsh Calvinistic Methodist minister in Victoria began his ministry in Ballarat in the 1860s where a number of the miners were Welsh.

In Warrnambool, members of the small Welsh community worshipped in the Wesleyan Methodist chapel or, if they were near Woodford or Grasmere, in Presbyterian churches. Those who were on farms would welcome the arrival of any minister and, in those early days, services were mostly held in private homes. In sparsely populated areas where services might be conducted only once a month, on the other Sundays, whenever possible, keen Christians travelled to join with congregations of other denominations.

Presbyterians believed in Predestination - but not - as did the Calvinistic Methodists - in free will to follow or reject God's call. There was another difficulty - Presbyterians approved of strong liquor. Calvinistic Methodists did not. The Grasmere Public Hall had originally been a small common school and became a temporary church building for the use of all Protestant denominations. Representatives of the local churches controlled the use of the hall. Consumption of alcohol at functions in the hall was quite acceptable - although any form of dancing, even Scottish dancing classes for children, was strictly prohibited. There were also Presbyterian congregations who, in the strict Free Presbyterian tradition, disapproved of organs in churches. After the Woolsthorpe congregation bought an organ William Lindsay of 'Quamby' and 'The Union' never again set foot in the church.

Members of the Roberts family - some of whom emigrated with the Midgley's, and about whom Sarah Midgley writes in her diary - all belonged to the Welsh church (or chapel) in Anglesey before they migrated to Warrnambool. They and their spouses give us a glimpse of how and where a deeply religious Welsh family worshipped in the colony. (list of Roberts family) Robert Hughes, Mary (my great grandmother and Sarah Midgley's particular friend) Ellen, Margaret, (grandmother of Gwen and Edna's Jones of The Union'), John and James Roberts were orphans who left Wales because it was full of unhappy memories and gravestones. They hoped for a better life in Australia.

As soon as he gained his majority Robert Hughes Roberts, the eldest brother, sold his Welsh farm, emigrated, and bought land on the Merri River near Woodford. He called his farm "Trefnant' after the farm he had inherited (and sold) in Wales. He and his wife, Emma, mainly worshiped with the Scottish Presbyterians in Woodford. The young couple struggled to survive but eventually, when their wheat crop was ruined by rust and they were caught up in the financial collapse of Bateman's business, were forced to sell the farm and the district. After some difficult years they settled in Pyramid Hill.

The family joined the Bible Christian Church, a non-conformist denomination which, in about 1904, amalgamated with the Methodists. One of their sons, Birch Roberts, was ordained as a minister of the Bible Christian Church. After the 1904 amalgamation he became a Methodist minister.

Another son, E. J. Roberts, attracted by the introduction of irrigation, was a pioneer in the dried fruit industry in Mildura. A devout Bible Christian - and then a Methodist -he formed a private foundation to benefit needy individuals and charitable organisations in the district. He was a strict

teetotaller, and he joined the order of Rechabites at the amazingly young age of 9, remaining a member until his death at aged 90.

Mary Roberts (Photo) emigrated with Robert Hughes Roberts in 1851. She worshipped with the Methodists in Warrnambool and, in 1858, in the new Methodist Chapel which was built. (Photo of chapel) Her stonemason husband, John Davies, who was responsible for the construction of most of the churches in Warrnambool - but did not worship in any of them, built the chapel. Possibly he never used the Welsh prayer book that he had been given when he left Wales. Certainly, when he died in 1908, he was not a member of any church. There was said to have been little love lost between Mary and her husband. To escape him, Mary set up house in Melbourne supposedly so that their children might attend school there. She never returned to Warrnambool. They lived in Albert Park and worshipped in the local Methodist church and at the Welsh Church in the La Trobe Street, Melbourne. In 1913 the two unmarried Davies daughters travelled to Anglesey to visit the birthplace of their parents. While in London and Wales they attended Welsh services and lectures.

James Roberts, (James' photo) who had, at the age of 13, emigrated with Robert Hughes and Mary, ran a sawmill in Warrnambool. He was married to Sarah Helen Davis (Sarah's Photo) according to the rites of the Methodist church but his daughter, Nell Roberts, was attached to St John's Presbyterian Church in Warrnambool. She was sent by the Society of Christian Endeavour to be a missionary in inland China. (Nell Roberts') She married the Reverend Charles Ellaby Davis who was also a missionary in China.

Margaret Roberts, (Margaret Roberts' photo) who, as soon as she turned 16 in 1852 followed her brothers and sister to Warrnambool, attended the Methodist chapel in Warrnambool. She married William Jones, (Margaret, William & baby Robert's photo) Gwen and Edna Jones' grandfather, in a Methodist ceremony. Tragically, Margaret died soon after the birth of her son, Robert John Jones, Gwen and Edna's father. The last letter that she wrote to her favourite brother, John, (John Roberts' photo) who was dying of consumption, gives us not only a glimpse of Margaret's spiritual outlook on life but also that of John Bunyan's Pilgrim and of many Calvinistic Methodists and other likeminded Christians of that era.

"I do hope, dear John, that God will be pleased to strengthen you, to prolong your days and may he cause you to grow in grace daily. Our hearts are sealed against his mercies. Oh that our eyes were opened that we could but see ourselves as we are, sinners of the deepest dye; there is