



Great
CENTRAL
STATE

THE FOUNDATION *of* THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY

JACK CROSS



WAKEFIELD PRESS

GREAT CENTRAL STATE

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Wakefield
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Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2011

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Cover design by Liz Nicholson, designBITE
Typeset by Wakefield Press
Printed and bound by Hyde Park Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Cross, Jack.
Title: Great central state: the foundation of the Northern Territory / Jack Cross.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 877 0 (pbk.).
Subjects: Northern Territory – History.
South Australia – History.
Dewey Number: 994.29



Publication of this book was assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



Arts SA



CONTENTS

PREFACE	xi
CHAPTER 1	
THE GREAT CENTRAL STATE	1
The Dream of the Great Asian Market	2
A Confused Acquisition	7
The Northern Territory Plan	19
The Wakefield Background	22
Plan in Detail – in Parliament	26
An Unequal Partnership	34
CHAPTER 2	
GAESAR AND HIS FORTUNE	42
The Banquet	42
First Northern Territory Expedition: 1864	51
Relief Ships – 1865	74
The Winding Up	90
Retribution	95
CHAPTER 3	
THE INTERVENTION OF THE PARTNERS	105
The Other Partners	105
The Great Debate	112
The Second Northern Territory Expedition: 1868–1869	125
Restitution	149
CHAPTER 4	
A SECOND SOUTH AUSTRALIA	162
Complications	162
The Indies Governor	164
The Indies Governor in Decline	187
The ‘Resulting Land Imbrolio’	196
‘Two Main Streets and a Chinese Quarter’	206

Crisis in Law and Order	215
Law and Aborigines	227
CHAPTER 5	
EXTREME SOLUTIONS	237
The Discovery of Lochac	238
‘That Insatiable Maelstrom’	255
‘The Laissez-Faire’ – Let the Market Decide	263
Dutch Response – and the Misadventures of Captain Cadell	277
Plan Misfires	286
CHAPTER 6	
THE MORMON PATTERN	293
Santals	294
Mennonites	301
Japanese	311
An Alternative Israel	319
CHAPTER 7	
COMING OF THE GAUGHOS	321
Other Colonisers: Different Stories	321
Ralph Milner and the Southern Route	328
Dillon Cox and the Queensland Side	337
Two Territories	364
CHAPTER 8	
CONCEDING DEFEAT	367
Epilogue	375
Documentation: Abbreviations	376
Author’s Note	378
Index	384

To Jillian B

'The past is never dead.
It's not even past.'

William Faulkner

PREFACE

The opening of the overland railway from Adelaide to Darwin in 2004 –as well as looking forward – refers back to an earlier history of the Northern Territory: the attempt by South Australia to develop the Territory as a bridge to Asia.

This is several histories wrapped into one. At one level it is the colourful story of the foundation years of the Northern Territory – that vast tract of Australia facing Asia which is so attractive to tourists and investors. At another level it is the tale of South Australia's attempt to replicate its own planned colonisation on the north coast – part of South Australia's, or more particularly some South Australians', bid to become the premier colony of Australia. Suggested names for this premier colony were Albert, Adelaide, Australia (being at the heart of Australia) and Shakespeare, but the name that eventually stuck was Great Central State. As such it is a case study in planned colonisation, a world wide movement in the mid-19th century, which, at its most ambitious, aimed at spreading civilisation around the world.

There are many ways of writing the history of the Territory. This approach involved a detailed study of the South Australian context, and uses some of the recurring themes in South Australian historiography. It is as much a history of the South Australian way of doing things as it is a history of the foundation of the Northern Territory. I have been particularly interested in the way South Australians, because they saw themselves as different from other colonials, tended to go back to experiences from their own history for the solutions. Take the way George Goyder and Charles Todd were asked to draw a second Goyder Line, separating agricultural and pastoral lands, for the Territory. I have also been interested in the interaction between forward planning and the intervention of apparently chaotic chance variables. A continuing theme in South Australian history was the conflict between grand vision and

numerous petty disputes among an inner circle of leading citizens – what Douglas Pike, of the Department of History at the University of Adelaide, with a twinkle in his eye, liked to call ‘the paradise of dissent’.

As well as representing events, a deliberate attempt has been made to represent some of the constructions of reality used at the time by the selective use of contemporary words, images, and stories, especially in relation to race and geography. At the time, race was the most common way of constructing knowledge about people of different cultures. Unlike our current view of geography, North-West Arnhem Land (the name is no longer used) tended to be seen as on the southern perimeter of the Indies Archipelago and much like Java, and therefore should be incorporated in the sphere of South-East Asia. The rhetoric of progress – the so-called March of Civilisation – was also widely invoked, with its preference for heroic language full of hyperbole and alliteration – words like ‘egregious’ and ‘imbroglio’.

Many of these narratives may well seem strange or prejudiced when viewed from another vantage point in history. But (as with relativity in physics) reference points of history are forever changing.

My method has been to support generalisations with ‘judiciously chosen examples’ (quoting Douglas Pike) in order to fill out the story and make the history live. Similarly many of the illustrations have been chosen because they are symbolic. Visual images of the time were particularly expressive (especially faces), consisting mainly of drawings, engravings and cartoons. No attempt was made to go beyond 1911. In general I have taken the view that more recent history would best be written by Territorians.

CHAPTER 1

THE GREAT CENTRAL STATE

‘The worst that can be said against the Government of 1863 is that they encouraged the dream of a self-supporting colony.’

Register, 28 March 1868

The strangest part of the history about to be related is that no one seemed to know when it first began.

In 1863 the representatives of the struggling colony of South Australia acquired a huge tract of so-called wasteland which they called the Northern Territory. But when the question was raised, no one seemed to know with any certainty how the idea of taking over such a large area of land had come about. ‘The thing has grown upon us’, wrote the *Advertiser* columnist. It had grown until it was too much trouble to turn back.¹

What kept the northern issue alive was a preoccupation by a number of South Australians – some of whom already had links with parts of Asia – with the idea of ‘The Unlimited Asian Market’. This meant gaining entry to the Indies Archipelago, particularly the Dutch East Indies and the Malay States, as well as the Indian sub-continent, but most of all China. At this stage trade with Japan was not an issue.

Linked to the dream of an Unlimited Asian Market was a second dream: of extending South Australia’s northern boundary right across the continent to the north coast to form what later came to be known as ‘The Great Central State’.

When it came to the Asian market, a Great Central State would be particularly advantaged, being at the centre of the Australian colonies, while its north coast was uniquely joined to Asia by the monsoon winds blowing from the north-west in the wet season and

¹ *Advertiser* 25/4/1864.

bringing ships from Asia – and then switching to the south-east in the dry and taking ships back to Asia. In the era of sail the map of the world was read differently from today.

The Dream of the Great Asian Market

According to William Hutt, one of the surviving planners of South Australia, whose letter appeared in the *South Australian Register* in 1864, the founders of the home colony in the 1830s had always wanted a northern boundary beside the Indian Ocean. The idea of a northern boundary facing Asia was, on his single evidence, older even than the Adelaide settlement itself.²

Hutt (who once applied to be governor) had served on two of the three associations formed successively in London in the first half of the 1830s to force under the notice of the Colonial Office Edward Gibbon Wakefield's new revolutionary method of colonisation as well as the feasibility of trying it out near the mouth of the River Murray, on the central south coast of Australia. Each of these associations did, in fact, want the northern boundary left open or, failing that, pushed north as far as possible. The first association of 1830–1831, the National Colonisation Society, laid down in its 'Proposal to His Majesty's Government for founding a colony on the southern coast of Australia' a southern, eastern and western, but not a northern boundary.³ The second association, the South Australian Land Company, proposed the use of a chartered company to pilot colonisation as in early Virginia 'between the 132nd and 141st degrees of East longitude, without any assigned boundary towards the north or interior'.⁴

It was later explained how the association wanted incorporated in their charter the right to extend the colony at the choice of the company.⁵ Some time between 16 April 1832, when a deputation presented the company's scheme to Lord Goderich of the Colonial Office, and 28 May, when a revised scheme was sent in, this hope received a severe set-back. The revised draft abandoned the idea

² *Register* 15/3/1864, Hutt's letter to Hart.

³ *Proposal to His Majesty's Government for founding a colony on the southern coast of Australia*, Nicol, London, 1831, p. 20.

⁴ *South Australian Land Company Prospectus 1832* (C.O. 13/1 Folio 83).

⁵ Statement concerning revision of the company (C.O. 13/2 Folio 35 *seq.*).



G.W. Goyder 'in pursuit of rainfall'. That is, land for agriculture.
(Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia – B 14851)

of an open north for a definite boundary at the twentieth parallel, thus still including all of Central Australia in the proposed colony.⁶ The change was probably made at the hands of James Stephen, the energetic Counsel to the Colonial Office, who was consulted during the interval and who believed that extravagant grants of land once almost ruined the chartered colonies of America.

Still Stephen thought the dimensions too extravagant. The third association, the South Australian Association of 1833–1834, started out by withdrawing the boundary approximately three-and-a-half degrees to the Tropic of Capricorn.⁷ The revised line was carefully incorporated in the 1834 Bill to create South Australia as a separate colony. But in the House of Commons, the Calcutta-born Francis Thornhill Baring, who possessed large areas of land for sale in

⁶ Whitmore to Goderich 28/5/1832 (C.O. 13/1 Folio 88); Enclosure (C.O. 13/1 Folio 92 *seq.*).

⁷ *South Australia Outline of the Plan of a Proposed Colony to be founded on the South Coast of Australia; with an account of the Soil, Climate, Ridgway*, London, 1834, p. 6.

America and did not want competition, was influential in having it reduced still further to the 26th parallel.⁸

No sooner was the new colony settled after 1836 than some South Australians began to draw the boundary northwards again in their own imagination. They had been planted in the driest colony in the driest inhabited continent on earth. By the mid 1850s it was clear to far-seeing individuals like George Goyder that the amount of land suitable for agriculture in South Australia would always be limited. On the other hand, the country above the 26th parallel was seen as a 'No Man's Land', a wasteland and all that those words implied – an uncivilised wilderness, little used by the existing inhabitants and beckoning to be explored and developed. In this context, No Man's Land did not so much mean that the land was unoccupied, but that hunter gathering by the traditional inhabitants was an inferior use of a precious commodity.⁹

Agitation to alter the existing boundaries began as early as the 1850s, and was centered mainly on the activities of four men: James 'Jemmy' Chambers, a shrewd pastoralist; William Finke, his partner; John McDouall Stuart, their surveyor and explorer; and Governor Richard Graves MacDonnell, graduate with distinction in classics and science at Trinity College Dublin, who represented the public interest. As it turned out, the reasons for their interests were not always compatible.

Chambers' vision was to open up a practical stock route across the continent linked by a chain of wells to the far north-west coast, from where, in the dry season, April to October, the trade winds would carry surplus stock to China and India, particularly horses to India. The whole concept was closely connected with the contemporary notion that commercial greatness awaited the country breaking into the Great Asian Market, coupled with the belief that North Australia and the coast of Asia were uniquely linked for trade by the monsoon winds which blew steadily towards Australia

⁸ H.P.D. (3) Vol. XXV c.701.

⁹ The legal term *Terra Nullius* may have been implied, but as far as I can discover was never used in South Australia in reference to the Northern Territory. For a comparison of Yolngu and European approaches to land see: Nancy M. Williams, *The Yolngu and their Land*, Stanford University Press, California, 1986.

in the wet season and away from Australia towards South-East Asia in the dry.

In 1853 Finke obtained the services of Stuart to spy out and survey runs reaching into the interior – and with luck, eventually through to the north coast itself. By this method Chambers and Finke aimed to lay open a path across the continent safe for cattle and sprinkled with stations and mines, while also taking first bite into any choice country then selling it at an enormous profit to those who followed.

This ambition seemed plausible in the late 1850s. South Australians were among the pioneers in dry pastoral management, as they were also to become in dry agriculture. With great ingenuity, individual pastoralists had already managed to invade the low rainfall areas by making use of every range and water-hole, and there was no reason to doubt that, by continuing the same practices, they could traverse the entire continent step by step to the Timor and Arafura seas.

Governor MacDonnell, on the other hand, represented a second interest in the efforts to acquire the northern wastelands. As well as strongly supporting pastoral expansion through to the north coast, he had visions of an overland telegraph line across the centre to connect with an undersea cable from Singapore – and thence linked all the way to London. This required getting control of all the country through to the north coast to prevent other colonies (especially New South Wales and Queensland) blocking its path. MacDonnell's interest in an overland telegraph reflected the fact that Adelaide had recently become the telegraph capital of Australia; and he wanted to make sure that it did not lose its pre-eminent position when an undersea cable eventually was extended to Australia.

South Australia's pre-eminence in telegraphy had begun with the recruitment from the Royal Observatory Greenwich of Charles Heavittree Todd in 1855, as government astronomer and superintendent of the electric telegraph. Even before leaving England Todd had dreams of linking Australia to the mother country with an electric telegraph. Soon after his arrival Todd, backed by Governor MacDonnell, took the lead in proposing and building the first inter-colonial overland line between Adelaide and Melbourne, started in April 1857 and opened in July 1858. This made Port Adelaide

the first important port of call for sailing ships using the Westerlies and bringing news from Europe, feeding into a telegraph network which eventually joined Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart and numerous provincial towns. (Perth, the first possible port of call, was isolated because of the Nullarbor.) News from English and European newspapers was summarised in Adelaide then tapped out by morse through a series of repeater stations to Melbourne and from there on to other capitals. But no sooner was the commercial advantage and prestige of this arrangement won, than it came under threat. In 1858–1859 a representative of the Red Sea and India Telegraph Company approached various colonial authorities in eastern Australia about their sharing the cost of a direct cable link to Brisbane. MacDonnell's response, aided by Todd and individual politicians with commercial interests, was to set in motion a vigorous campaign by South Australia (lasting for 12 years in all) to prevent Queensland getting the cable route because it put South Australia at the tail end of all commercial intelligence coming from overseas.

Whatever the ambitions of his supporters, such as Chambers, Finke and MacDonnell, John McDouall Stuart's epic explorations were in large part a working out of his private demons. Socially frustrated and fighting back alcoholism he drove himself beyond endurance to conquer the forces of Nature. He was a classic colonial hero. Like many heroes popular adoration for him rose quickly and doubts followed almost as fast. He represented yet another element in the move to take over the Territory. At the height of his fame, between about 1860 and 1863, there was a popular feeling in South Australia that the colony deserved the wastelands as a reward for the exertions of its great explorers such as Stuart, Sturt and McKinlay. Stuart's main reputation rested on three expeditions: in 1860 to the centre of Australia, where he hoisted the British flag on Central Mount Sturt and then proceeded to Tennant Creek, but failed to find a way to the Victoria River; then in 1860–1861 a largely government-sponsored expedition to the dry lands around Newcastle Waters (over two-thirds of the way across the continent) before he was forced to turn back; finally in 1862 another mainly government expedition, successfully through to what he erroneously thought was the mouth of the Adelaide River. But within a few

months of his triumphant return to a hero's welcome in the streets of Adelaide, the doubts were beginning to circulate. He had three times failed to penetrate the dry country north-west of Tennant Creek to the Victoria River which had been his express instruction. Every time Stuart tried to veer to the north-west, the harshness of the country drove him north.

Just as the ambition of the four men promised rewards, their luck left them. In 1862 Chambers died in his prime at the age of 49. Seventeen months later Finke dropped dead off a stool in a pub in Currie Street at 48. With Chambers and Finke gone, a reaction set in – especially to trusting their judgement. Stuart returned from crossing the continent a broken man and soon left the country. In 1862 Governor MacDonnell was transferred allegedly because of his connection with the Great Northern Copper Mine scandal. MacDonnell had arrived in 1855 prior to South Australia gaining self-government in 1857, and could never step down from being the master. With MacDonnell's departure an era ended, democracy took hold and the Northern Territory question soon became secondary to local issues such as schools, roads, and the conflict between farmers and pastoralists over land with adequate rainfall – a conflict which reached its peak in 1865.

A Confused Acquisition

Competition between Chambers and MacDonnell complicated moves to acquire the Territory. Chambers' aim was to take advantage of his prior access to the lands in the north discovered by Stuart, and sell pastoral and mining lands to anyone willing to buy. In 1859, Finke, using J.B. Neales, Commissioner of Crown Lands, as link man, tricked the governor into lending his name to the bogus Great Northern Copper Mine Company. Consequently, Chambers, Finke, John Baker and Captain John Hart immediately made an alleged fortune selling 'illegal mining leases' and 'exhausted holes' (to quote the governor) to unsuspecting capitalists in London. Governor MacDonnell was so upset by the scam that he donned explorer's clothes and travelled to the dry north as far as William Creek to investigate the bogus sites for himself. Neales was made to resign for abuse of office.

The tensions continued after Stuart returned from his first

major exploration to the centre of Australia in 1860. Chambers forbade Stuart to reveal details of his trip, even to the governor when he was invited to Government House – an exclusion which annoyed the Queen’s representative. Chambers also took possession of all Stuart’s maps, even changing some of the explorer’s names of places to those of his family. MacDonnell believed he was working for the public good and resented Chambers’ and Finke’s narrow focus on making money.¹⁰

In October 1860, soon after Stuart’s return from the centre of Australia – and without access to Stuart’s journal – Governor MacDonnell made the first move to acquire the Northern Territory. On 26 October he despatched a letter to the Colonial Office, with little or no reference to his advisers in government. Parliament knew little about the approach, except that the governor intended to write home to England (for a second time, the first was in 1857) about the so-called ‘Western Territory’ (which still belonged to New South Wales), the three-degree gap between the borders of South and Western Australia.¹¹

The main point of Governor MacDonnell’s letter was that South Australian pastoralists were about to infiltrate across the existing western and northern boundaries. To counter this situation MacDonnell proposed that the Western Territory should be annexed permanently to South Australia, while the Northern Territory above the 26th parallel should be temporarily annexed to South Australia until a separate tropical colony existed on the north-west coast, perhaps centred on the Victoria River. In pressing South Australia’s special claim to the Northern Territory MacDonnell stressed *convenience of administration* as the major justification, as well as South Australia’s proven record in opening up the region. No other government at the time (he argued) was so conveniently situated to protect and administer it. He then went on to refer to the recent discoveries made by Stuart in finding a natural path far into

¹⁰ Perhaps the worst scam in South Australian colonial history. For years after, those implicated blamed one another – and all blamed Finke because he was German. See S.A.P.P. 111, 115, 116 of 1859; 83 of 1860; 234 of 1862. For a recent study of Stuart (including the scam) see J. Bailey, *Mr Stuart’s Track*, MacMillan, Sydney, 2006, Chapter 6.

¹¹ S.A.P.D. 1860 c.1046; *Register* 13/10/1860 Parliamentary Proceedings. The *Constitution Act* was passed in 1856 and the new parliament met in 1857.



Governor Dominick Daly successfully backed South Australia's bid to take over the Northern Territory. He wanted the Plains of Promise from Queensland as well. (*Illustrated Sydney News* 25/3/1868. Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia)

the interior; the relentless movement of pastoralists from south to north; and the hope of eventually establishing a trade in horses via the north coast to India.¹²

The Secretary of State in London decided these were better arguments for shifting the existing northern boundary northwards in stages ahead of settlement, than for handing over all the country through to the north coast.¹³

In his letter to London, MacDonnell also made a brief reference to an overland telegraph. He conceded that the line might not follow Stuart's route – while behind the scenes he shared with Todd and others the hope that once they gained access to all the land to the north coast, a direct route across Australia to Adelaide was exactly what would happen.

At the time, the centre of Australia attracted most attention among the general public because Stuart's discoveries in Central Australia in a favourable season had led to a wave of optimism. In a series of articles, the *Register* argued that South Australia was no longer now a poor colony wedged between desert to the north and

¹² MacDonnell to Newcastle 26/10/1860 (S.A.P.P. 29 of 1861); Extension of Western Boundary of South Australia (S.A.P.P. 27 of 1858).

¹³ Newcastle to MacDonnell 26/2/1861 (S.A.P.P. 29 of 1861).

the sea to the south. One of the politicians wanting them to acquire Stuart's land straightaway was Boyle Travers Finniss.¹⁴

The governor's letter reached London at a time of a national crisis caused mainly by the situation in Europe which brought Palmerston to power for life and with him the Duke of Newcastle, Henry Pelham (now in the twilight of his career), in charge of the colonies. The main problem in Europe in 1859–1860 was the change in the balance of power almost leading to war caused by the attempted unification of Italy. When difficulties appeared near to home, the distant colonies were generally the first to be pruned, and Newcastle, with failing health, became distinguished for the ingenuity by which he avoided any action that added to the cost of his department. According to one British journal his 'do-nothing policy' was seen best of all in the handling of the North Australia question.¹⁵

'Do nothing' reflected the domestic policy (in contrast to the foreign policy) of the second Palmerston government from 1859–1865. In his reply to MacDonnell, the Duke of Newcastle stressed that the annexation of North Australia was not a pressing affair. He pointed out that South Australia, separated as it was by the whole breadth of the continent, seemed of all colonies the least conveniently situated to administer it. Turning to the immediate question of the infiltration of pastoralists into a No Man's Land, he promised with the preparation of suitable legislation to extend the western boundary to meet Western Australia and to allow the northern boundary to be gradually shifted as the need arose.¹⁶

Not long after Newcastle had responded to Governor MacDonnell he received another approach, this one stressing how Queensland squatters were about to invade the No Man's Land on its eastern boundary. The new move came from Sir Charles Nicholson, first speaker of the Legislative Council of New South Wales, first president of the Legislative Council of Queensland,

¹⁴ Examples, *Register* 26/10/1860 leader; 26/12/1860, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Australian and New Zealand Gazette* 9/1/1864 (in *Register* 14/3/1864, p. 2). Newcastle died 18/10/1864, Palmerston died exactly a year later.

¹⁶ Newcastle to MacDonnell 26/2/1861 (S.A.P.P. 29 of 1861). The western boundary now corresponded to the Pope's famous line of demarcation between the Portuguese world to the west and the Spanish to the east.