

Wakefield Press

Turning Points

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Turning Points

Chapters in South Australian History

Edited by

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

First published 2012

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Cover design by Michael Deves
Typeset by Wakefield Press
Printed and bound by Hyde Park Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: Turning points: chapters in South Australian history /
 Robert Foster and Paul Sendziuk (eds).
ISBN: 978 1 74305 119 1 (pbk.).
Notes: Includes index.
Subjects: South Australia – History.
Other Authors/ Foster, Robert.
Contributors: Sendziuk, Paul, 1974– .
Dewey Number: 994.23



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, Professor James McWha, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Nick Harvey, and the Head of the School of History and Politics, Professor Clem Macintyre, for providing the financial and logistical support that allowed us to stage the 'Turning Points' public lecture series in July and August 2011. Thanks to Mirna Heruc and Elizabeth Pascale of Art and Heritage Collections at the University of Adelaide for committing their time and resources to assist in the promotion and staging of the series. Particular thanks to Clare Parker of the History Discipline, who not only helped in the organisation of the event, but also provided valuable assistance in proofreading and indexing the manuscript. Thanks to the Art Gallery of South Australia for providing us with the images used in the lectures and the book. Our deep gratitude goes to the speakers themselves for generously offering their time. We would also like to acknowledge the members of the public who came to the lectures on a series of cold winter nights and demonstrated the depth of community interest in South Australian History. Finally, we would like to express our continuing appreciation of Wakefield Press for supporting the lecture series and for undertaking to publish this volume.

Turning Points in South Australian History

ROBERT FOSTER & PAUL SENDZIUK

The year 2011 was the 175th anniversary of European settlement in South Australia; not one of the marquee commemorations in the grander scheme of things, but more than sufficient to encourage a reflection on that history. To this end a group of eminent Australian historians, either South Australians or scholars whose work engages South Australian history, were invited to take part in a series of public lectures in which they were asked to address the theme ‘Turning Points in South Australian History’. This book is the outcome of that lecture series, reproducing all of the lectures as scholarly chapters, along with some others specially written for this collection. Each of the contributors were invited to approach the task as they saw fit, and the chapters vary in style from standard scholarly histories, to more free-form reflections on the topics they chose.

What are ‘Turning Points’? Martin Crotty and David Roberts recently addressed this question in their book *Turning Points in Australian History* and conceded that they used the concept somewhat loosely to encompass not just points in time that might have produced ‘a marked divergence from previous ideas, developments and practices’, but also ‘crucial moments’, ‘milestones’ or ‘watersheds’ in the unfolding of history.¹ We adopt a similar approach here. It is not possible in a volume such as this to comprehensively survey the history of the state, but by engaging it from the perspective of ‘Turning Points’, we can at least sample some of that history’s key features and developments.

Perhaps our first turning point is the very establishment of South Australia itself, in the sense that its origins differ markedly from those of the earlier Australian colonies. Indeed, this idea of a ‘sense of difference’ is often seen as emblematic of the state’s history. Derek Whitelock’s book *Adelaide 1836–1976: A History of Difference* is overtly guided by the theme: Adelaide’s ‘distinctiveness’, he writes, lies ‘entwined in the city’s historical origins.’² While Whitelock addressed the theme with direct

reference to Adelaide, it is nonetheless evident in histories of the state itself, such as Douglas Pike's classic account of South Australia's foundation, *Paradise of Dissent*.³ What was that difference? In a nutshell, the narrative is that South Australia was established independently of the earlier Australian colonies, outlawed the importation of convicts, was based on rational economic principles, and was a pioneer of social and political reform. There is a measure of truth in these claims, and South Australians, especially in the 19th century, took great pride in their story, as Foster and Nettelbeck's chapter demonstrates. However, history conceived as a triumphant parade of progress is inevitably shallow, and obscures a more complex, often fraught, but ultimately much more interesting truth. The diverse contributions in this volume tease out some of those complexities.

The second chapter in this book, written by Bill Gammage, goes to one of the most fundamental turning points of all, the way the nature of the land itself was changed by European colonisation. Born in Narrandera and resident of Canberra, Bill Gammage nonetheless spent most of his academic career at the University of Adelaide, where he nurtured and encouraged a generation of Australian and, particularly, South Australian historians. His first book, *The Broken Years* (1974), is a study of the experiences of Australian soldiers in the First World War, and has become a classic of Australian war literature. Throughout his career Gammage has continued to explore Australia's experience of war, but he has also maintained a long-time interest in Australian Indigenous history, and that is the theme he explores here. In his chapter, 'The Adelaide District in 1836', Gammage makes the claim that what the settlers saw when they first arrived on the Adelaide Plains was an environment carefully crafted by its Aboriginal owners through the use of fire. While the idea that Aboriginal people used fire to facilitate hunting and gathering is now an orthodoxy,⁴ Gammage takes the argument much further and suggests that fire was used as a tool of quite sophisticated land management.

Born in Tasmania, where he first studied convicts, Henry Reynolds soon travelled north to James Cook University in Queensland, and turned to the study of Australia's Indigenous history. His first book, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), was a ground-breaking study of frontier violence between Aboriginal people and Europeans in Australia. In the years that followed, Reynolds' work has surveyed the many dimensions of race relations in colonial Australia. Perhaps the most influential of his books is *The Law of the Land* (1987), which re-assessed the history of Aboriginal rights to land in Australia. In his chapter 'South Australia: Between Van Diemen's Land and New Zealand', Reynolds re-visits this story and reminds us of what a pivotal role the settlement of South Australia played in that history. As the colony of South Australia was being planned, reformers in the British government, who had successfully turned against slavery, now turned their attention to the rights and welfare of Aboriginal people across the Empire. The prospective colony of South Australia was put under the microscope, and the planners

were asked, among other things, to make provision for Aboriginal rights to land. This was, Reynolds argues, Australia's 'first land rights movement'. The argument Reynolds first made in *The Law of the Land*, and which he re-tells here, would eventually become significant in the Mabo decision of the High Court (1992), which led to the recognition of Native Title in Australia.⁵

Paul Sendziuk grew up on the Western Australian goldfields and developed a keen awareness of how the 'little states', such as WA and South Australia, are generally neglected by authors of national histories. In co-convening the 'Turning Points' lecture series, and co-editing this book, he is pleased to reveal what is often left out. As a relatively recent emigrant to Adelaide, and bringing the scepticism of an outsider, Sendziuk is well placed to observe the way in which South Australians construct their identities and take particular pride in the 'free' origins of their state. This became the starting point for his chapter, 'No Convicts Here', which unravels the myth of South Australia's convict-free foundation. His findings are quite remarkable: not only did convicts find their way to South Australia, but the fledging colony transported the worst of its own criminals to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. South Australian authorities devised various means of deterring the emigration of escaped and emancipated convicts and ex-convicts, and sought to punish those who came, seemingly with little success.

Robert Foster teaches in the School of History and Politics, and Amanda Nettelbeck in the School of Humanities, both at the University of Adelaide. Since the 1980s, Robert Foster, a student of Bill Gammage, has written extensively on Australian, and especially South Australian, Indigenous history. Amanda Nettelbeck, whose first book was *Reading David Malouf* (1994), shifted her attention to Australian colonial literature, and then Australian Indigenous History in the 1990s. Individually and collaboratively, Foster and Nettelbeck have written numerous books and articles on the history of relations between Aboriginal people and settlers in colonial South Australia. Their most recent book, *Out of the Silence: The History and Memory of South Australia's Frontier Wars* (2012), explores not only the nature and extent of frontier violence in South Australia, but also how that story has been remembered. Their chapter in this volume, 'Proclamation Day and the Rise and Fall of South Australian Nationalism', explores South Australia's sense of 'difference' in the nineteenth century through the lens of Proclamation Day ceremonies. While it might sound strange today to speak of South Australian 'nationalism', we should remember that until Federation all the Australian colonies were independent and self-governing parts of the British Empire. As Anthony Trollope observed of the Australian colonies in the 1870s, they are 'determined to be separate ... They are Victorians, or Queenslanders, or men of New South Wales'.⁶

In her chapter titled 'Sex and Citizenship: From Ballot Box to Bedrooms', Susan Magarey takes as her subject two key turning points in the advancement of

women in South Australia: the move towards the admission of women to political citizenship (via the right to vote) and to economic citizenship (via access to paid work). While the campaigns that secured the right to vote for women in the 1890s and the passing of legislation against discriminatory employment practices in the 1970s came some eighty years apart, Magarey discerns that they were linked by a common concern about sex and were both underpinned by the need to reconceptualise female sexuality. In order to understand how the two legislative reforms came about, the author asks us to consider a range of explanations that are political, structural and cultural in nature. Magarey grew up and worked in South Australia, being one of the founders of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at The University of Adelaide, and has a personal connection to the stories that she relates; she was involved in the Women's Liberation Movement that helped secure the anti-discrimination legislation in the 1970s and one of her forebears, Dr Sylvanus Magarey, supported the women's suffrage legislation in South Australian parliament. Magarey's work here is an extension of a distinguished career in which the publication of books about women features prominently. She is the prize-winning author of a biography of Catherine Helen Spence, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women* (new edition 2010), as well as *Passions of the First-Wave Feminists* (2001), and, with co-author Kerrie Round, *Roma the First: A Biography of Dame Roma Mitchell* (2007; revised edition 2009).

Jill Roe also grew up in South Australia, on a farm near Koppio on the state's west coast. Like a lot of country kids, she came to the city where she graduated from the University of Adelaide before moving to Sydney. For most of her career she taught History at Macquarie University. These experiences perhaps gave her a more than usual sympathy for her principal subject, the novelist Miles Franklin, who also left the country behind for a career in the 'big smoke'. Her biography *Stella Miles Franklin* (2008) is an epic account of Franklin's life and a prize-winning work. Roe has also had a long association with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and was a long-time President of the Australian Historical Association. In this chapter she takes a more personal – 'back to Koppio' – approach to her task of examining life in rural South Australia. Rather than examining a single turn, she highlights multiple turning points; the ebbs and flows, the ups and downs, the good and the variable rhythms of country life.

From the country we move to the city, or at least to a suburb of one. The building of Elizabeth in the 1950s and 1960s was the cornerstone of Premier Thomas Playford's grand plan for the industrial and demographic development of the state. It was achieved by the importation of working-class migrants from Europe, especially the United Kingdom, and the vision of an exceptional cohort of civil servant planners who knew that South Australians needed to think differently if the state was to match the prosperity of its larger and mineral-rich neighbours. Mark Peel, the son of British migrants, brings this captivating story to life,

integrating memories of his own childhood in Elizabeth. As the best historians often manage to do, Peel encourages us to look beyond the period and place in question to consider what ambitious migrants and bold urban planners might offer Australia today if only they were trusted by government to do so. Like so many of its brightest students, Mark Peel left Elizabeth and completed degrees at Flinders University, Johns Hopkins University and the University of Melbourne. He then taught History at Monash University for many years before taking up his present position as Professor of Modern Cultural and Social History at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of numerous books including *Good Times, Hard Times: The Past and the Future in Elizabeth* (1995), *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty* (2003), *A History of Australia* (2011), and most recently *Miss Cutler and the Case of the Resurrected Horse: Social Work and the Story of Poverty in America, Australia and Britain* (2011).

Both the author and the subject of the penultimate chapter of this volume need little introduction. The author is Neal Blewett, a long-serving member of Federal Parliament (1977–94) and a former minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments. Prior to entering parliament, Blewett had a distinguished career as a political scientist and taught this subject at Flinders University. He was born in Tasmania and educated at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, but raised his children and spent much of his adult life in South Australia. Blewett's subject, former premier Don Dunstan, is both a political contemporary and forebear, having entered state parliament two decades before Blewett went to Canberra; both were committed social democrats and sometimes at odds with stalwarts of the Australian Labor Party. Dunstan's support for the arts and social policy innovations, as well as his culinary and sartorial experiments, should be familiar to South Australian audiences. Less well known is the story of how Dunstan's particular brand of social democracy, and the tactics he employed, revolutionised politics in the 1960s and 1970s and were crucial in Labor gaining power at a Federal level in 1972. Neal Blewett offers a fascinating insight into this momentous period in the state's – and nation's – history, composed from an extensive array of sources and anecdotes.

John Hirst has been labelled a 'conservative' by historians who favour what might be termed the 'radical nationalist' version of Australian history. This is because he has been interested in the lives of colonial elites, as much as workers, and contradicted long-held views about the brutality of the convict system and the centrality of class and sectarian conflict in shaping Australian history.⁷ But there is nothing conservative about the way in which Hirst goes about challenging established orthodoxies, nor the manner in which he presents his arguments. In many ways, the question that Hirst set himself in his chapter is the most difficult of all those chosen by the book's contributors. Rather than examining any one turning point, his aim was to illuminate what makes South Australia different.

What he discovered, however, are the ways in which the histories of the other states resemble events in South Australia much more closely than most historians have been prepared to accept. In characteristic iconoclastic fashion, he uses the occasion of the celebration of South Australia's 175th anniversary to show people in other states what they have to learn about their own origins.

The Adelaide District in 1836

BILL GAMMAGE

Australia's founding migrants had two primary requirements: fresh water to start a new life, and a port to stay tied to the old life – a contradiction at the heart of every settler experience. Adelaide was the last state capital site chosen, and all its predecessors had trouble with water, or a port, or both. South Australia duplicated these troubles, first on Kangaroo Island (not enough water), then at Glenelg (not a port). Finally William Light put a port on the coast and a capital on the water, as Brisbane, Perth and Melbourne had done, and as in those places thus sparked squabbles lasting years on which mattered most.

Settlers next wanted grass, and Adelaide rewarded them more richly than any other capital. There was so much grass, judiciously studded with trees, that newcomers often called the district a 'park'. Today, 'park' is never used to describe our bush, unless in the sense of National Park, which states its uses rather than its scenery. We did not have a scenery word equivalent to 'park' in 1836. On the ground and in our minds, those parks have been destroyed.

What were they like? To see how plants were distributed in 1836, we follow the first settlers from Kangaroo Island to Adelaide, then down the coastal plain and fringing hills to Encounter Bay. The plant distribution in this district, indeed in all Australia, was not natural, but made.¹ To make it, Aborigines worked with the country where it suited, but where it didn't suit they changed the country, most obviously by replacing trees with grass. They managed every inch of ground, not with equal frequency, but with equal thought, for every inch was made by a Dreaming ancestor and had to be kept as it was. Not for these careful managers was any notion of wilderness or its equivalent, *terra nullius*: that was made by Europeans after 1836. That wilderness exists now but not then conveys how momentous a turning point the British coming was.

We now know things about Australia's plants that newcomers in 1836 did not. We know how densely eucalypts and scrub grow without fire. We know too that most native plants tolerate fire, and that many encourage it. Thus in colonial paintings and words we can see the effects of fire that newcomers could not. What they thought natural we can see was made, by fire or no fire.

Let us examine some of those paintings. Today is the 175th anniversary of the landing of the first official settlers on Kangaroo Island, so like most of them I begin briefly there. In William Westall's *View on the north side of Kangaroo Island* (Figure 1), we see animals untroubled by humans and dense forest running to the shore. Westall's views on the south coast of Australia show similar dense bush around the island, because no one lived there: it was the isle of the dead. Its only decent clearing in 1836 was not there in 1802; it was made on Cygnet River later, by a runaway sailor, and was so valuable that the new arrivals stole it.² This dense forest shows how southern eucalypts grow without regular fire.

On the mainland, settlers first tried Glenelg, which we see in J.A. Thomas' *View from the surveyors flagstaff on the beach, Holdfast Bay* (Figure 2). At left is Black Forest, but at right the trees are curiously distributed: they box an open plain. Why? The rest is mostly grass, yet around Adelaide almost every soil grows one tree species or another, and this land grows trees now. Why so few then? The difference between then and now, and between here and Kangaroo Island, is fire. Not bushfire – most Australian plants survive that – but deliberate, repeated fire, clearing off seedlings while carefully shielding isolated belts and clumps. We are looking at Aboriginal land management.

On 16 November 1836 Mary Thomas wrote here, '[t]he country, as far as we could see, was certainly beautiful, and resembled an English park, with long grass in abundance and fine trees scattered about, but not so many as to make it unpleasant, and no brushwood'.³ Being summer the grass was green, and wattle and banksia stood with 'tall and stately gum-trees on all sides'.⁴ Inland were lagoons and the Sturt River, thick with tall reeds. The Adelaide track crossed 'level land studded with trees, and every here and there a stretch of rich meadow-land ... the grass in many places three or four feet high, and the whole tract evidently of the most luxurious description'.⁵ This is nothing like Kangaroo Island.

Even more striking, while some trees have been deliberately cleared, others have been deliberately left, and left in patterns: note that trees box in Thomas' painting, and foothills have tree lines along the crests, yet all but one face is grass, while all bases are forest.

In Thomas' *View of the Glenelg plains, near the hills*, we see the same plains and hills nearer Mt Lofty (Figure 3). Plain and hill grass suddenly gives way to forest, breaking the land into sharp-edged belts and clearings, with denser tree lines along the crests. This pattern demands skilful fire over a long time, yet it was common in 1836.

I call the pattern a template, a deliberate and long-term distribution of plants to locate an animal species, making it predictable for day-to-day harvest. The most obvious templates joined the grass feed to the forest shelter that kangaroos prefer. We now accept that Aborigines burnt grass to bring on green pick for grazers, but they did more. They made forest or scrub shelter not too thin or too thick, and more open near its edge than within. Beside it they put good grass, split by trees



Figure 1. William Westall, *View on the north side of Kangaroo Island*, 1802 (an7746463, National Library of Australia)



Figure 2. J.A. Thomas, *View from the surveyors flagstaff on the beach, Holdfast Bay*, 1837? (vn5924559, National Library of Australia)

so hunters could ambush prey. They left a template alone until game was quiet and abundant, then to activate it burnt a grass patch or two, knowing that when it re-shot green kangaroos would seek it out. Over centuries at least two fire regimes opened this forest, another managed the grass, and from time to time another activated the template.

A template spent much time out of commission. Hunted kangaroos become