Quiet City

Walking in West Terrace Cemetery

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Under Summer Skies
It is one of those blue mornings when the air feels thin, a luminous morning on which all seems more or less right with the world. I turn in through the cemetery’s main gates, and immediately find myself in a calmer, less hurried place. The small red-brick curator’s cottage stands to the left of the entrance. Built in 1907, this is the third dwelling on the site, the earliest being the 1843 timber cottage in which the cemetery’s first sexton John Monck lived with his wife, Catherine – poor Catherine Monck, who birthed and buried five children here before expiring herself. The Dead House, or morgue, was once close by. It stood just south of the caretaker’s cottage where the eastern road from West Terrace meets the path junction in the area known as Plan Z. But it was always vulnerable to vandalism, and with the development of the private funeral industry its use declined and it has been demolished.

The poet Caroline Carleton also occupied that early cottage, which by 1857 had become so ramshackle it was replaced with a new lodge. From 1855 until 1861 Caroline lived here with her husband and children, and if you were raised in South Australia, or went to school here for any length of time, then you can probably recite at least one of her poems.

In 1859 the Gawler Institute celebrated its second anniversary by running a competition for the lyrics of a patriotic song. The closing date was 14 October of the same year, and the substantial prize of
ten guineas stirred public interest. Competitors were instructed to write ‘Poem for Prize’ on the envelope, and to address their entries to George Isaacs, Gawler. Rather than submitting under their real names they were to choose a motto, and from ninety-three entries the judges settled on a poem by a writer with the pen name ‘Nil Desperandum’. Its author was Caroline Carleton.

Her pseudonym carries more than a hint of desperation, as well it might, for Caroline wrote the sunny lyrics generations of schoolchildren would sing at morning assembly while living with her ailing husband and their five children in the superintendent’s house at West Terrace Cemetery. When a subsequent competition selected a melody by the German composer Carl Linger, ‘The Song of Australia’ would become an enduring symbol of home for those raised beneath South Australia’s ‘summer skies’; in the 1970s it would even jostle, without success, for a place as the national anthem. But while the lyrics are still familiar to many South Australians, few now could name the poet.

Caroline was born at Bonnar’s Hall in Middlesex, the youngest daughter of a bookseller, William Baynes, and his second wife, Mary Ann. Her grandparents were French aristocrats who fled to England at the time of the French Revolution. An intelligent and well-educated young woman, Caroline spoke French and Italian and knew Latin; she played both the pianoforte and the harp. With these accomplishments, and her youth and beauty, a bright future seemed assured when at eighteen she met and married Charles James Carleton, a medical student at Guy’s Hospital.

Charles had a family connection with the Earls of Dorchester, and has been described as ‘of artistic temperament, somewhat delicate health, and sweet disposition’. While Caroline clearly had a bookish upbringing and wrote poetry, Charles was said to enjoy making pen and ink sketches. Around 1832 he wrote and illustrated a medical book with the intriguing title Paintings of the Anatomy of the Brain, Explained in a series of Paintings from the Subject. It seems likely that their mutual interest in the arts drew the couple together.
Unfortunately, Charles never completed his medical degree, and his employment history would always be one of sudden shifts of direction. But he charmed Caroline Baynes; they married and had two children, and it might have been the pressure of providing for his young family rather than any weakness of resolve that forced Charles Carleton to quit his medical studies and look towards the new colony of South Australia.

In the summer of 1839 Charles and Caroline Carleton, with their two tiny sons, sailed aboard the *Prince Regent*. Other than in the experience of refugee people fleeing war-torn homelands, the quayside scenes at such momentous partings are almost unimaginable in this age of jet travel. But while Caroline may have been venturing into the unknown, in her later poems we glimpse a free spirit who must have relished the grand adventure of the voyage, with its promise of reaching an exotic land.

Whatever dreams she may have cherished were quickly shattered, for the voyage on the *Prince Regent* was rough, and provisions ran short. Of the 199 passengers who embarked, there were twenty-three deaths. Charles acted as the ship’s Medical Officer, but despite his efforts both Carleton children died. The phrase ‘buried at sea’ is one of those euphemisms so dear to the Victorians, an attempt to smother with language the horror of watching the bundled body of an adored infant being launched into the limitless and empty ocean, and of sailing on. When Caroline arrived at Holdfast Bay on 26 September 1839, childless and weakened by the deprivations of the journey, she must have wondered what she had done to deserve such a fate.

Although they had reached their destination there was to be more discomfort, for at disembarkation much of the luggage in the hold was found to be underwater and had to be stood on end to drain. Due to the tides, it was between seven and eight o’clock in the evening by the time the passengers had landed and been loaded onto the waiting carts. At least one driver declined to wait for baggage and, pleading the lateness of the hour, rattled away into the darkness with an empty cart. The remaining belongings had to
be left behind overnight, and amid protests from disgruntled passengers the goods were made secure. During the night an unusually high tide driven by strong south-west winds caused further damage, and some of the items lost were a sixty-five-pound tub of butter, a canister of gunpowder, a carton containing assorted pieces of delft, and a box of books wrapped in a piece of carpet.

Letters written to family in England by another passenger on the *Prince Regent*, William Ewens, paint an optimistic portrait of Adelaide, and it must be assumed that the Carletons were likewise pleasantly surprised. For one thing, it was far more built up than had been expected, with houses and many other buildings. Ewens described the views of the country as more handsome than ‘a Gentleman’s park’, with a range of beautiful hills as far as the eye could see. Flowers and birds were likewise pleasing, and the parrots made good eating, though he thought it a pity to kill them.

Vegetables were ‘very Dear’. Candles cost 2 shillings and 6 pence, milk 8 pence a quart. A house with three little rooms could be rented for 1 pound and 4 shillings a week. For many people setting up in their first home, there would be dirt floors, packing cases for tables and empty barrels for chairs. Portable houses and tents were common, and despite Ewens’s impression of a settled town, others complained of signboards in the scrub bearing the names of terraces and squares that existed only on a map or plan; they spoke of an imaginary town without buildings, where cattle rubbing against the posts were the only evidence of life. There were white ants to deal with, locusts, fleas and cockroaches, and the ever-present flies. This then was the reality of life in Adelaide at the time of Caroline and Charles Carleton’s arrival.

Charles bought land at Glenelg and opened a chemist’s shop, but the economic strain in the colony during the early 1840s found them on the brink of insolvency. Somehow they avoided that step, and soon Charles was making and selling cordials, castor oil, and other commodities. As an assayer, he accompanied the Inspector of Mounted Police, Alexander Tolmer, on an expedition to Mount Alexander, and on his return took up a position as medical dispenser.
for Doctor Nash, the colonial surgeon. During this appointment he and Caroline lived at the Adelaide Hospital with their young daughters.

After moving to Kapunda, and then back to Adelaide, Caroline gave birth to a son, Charles James. Meanwhile, her husband went to Victoria, perhaps as a medical officer at the diggings. On his return to Adelaide he advertised for sale Carleton's Baking Powder, and Carleton's Farinaceous Food, Dysenteric Pills, and other remedies bearing his name. By 1853 he was selling bottled English porter and stout at Blyth's Building, Hindley Street, and there is a sense of desperation surrounding the family at this point. At last, in 1855, Charles took up an appointment as superintendent at West Terrace Cemetery, and he and Caroline and their children went to live there.

Legend has it that Caroline wrote ‘The Song of Australia’ on a seat in the cemetery while her children played around her. On Sunday afternoons it was a popular place to walk, more park-like than the parklands; in the year before the Carletons took over, John Monck reported that in fine weather hundreds of people came to promenade among the groves of wattles and other trees. Even allowing for Monck’s exaggeration, it seems likely that a significant number of people were drawn there to walk – comfortable with the proximity of death in an era when bereavement and grief had clearly defined rituals.

Caroline Carleton wrote poetry for pleasure, but in the Gawler poetry competition her eye would have been on the prize, for the cemetery was beset by financial difficulties and within only a few months of taking charge her husband faced criticism for his record-keeping, and eventually for exceeding the budget. Only an appeal to the governor prevented a sum of £55 being extracted from Charles’s salary in compensation for this extravagance. By 1859 he was dying of tuberculosis and unable to work, and his wife had taken over the running of the cemetery.

Some readers of the *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register* were stinging in their criticism of Caroline’s winning poem. It was an ‘ominous fact’ that ‘a lady gained the laurel’ with a poem that
had ‘the sweet softness of the female mind, which characteristic almost unfits it for a patriotic song’. ‘Cantator’ of Goolwa wondered whether a pair of analytical chemists could throw light on the extraordinary combinations of colour depicted in the poem, singling out ‘rosy light’ and ‘azure’. Another critic considered the poem to be ‘calm, soft, gentle and feminine, suitable to be sung by a cluster of juveniles at a tea party’. A national song, it was proposed, ought to be ‘short, bold, masculine and full of fire’. In a letter to the editor, ‘T’ moaned that the prospects of the colony were ‘already sufficiently gloomy’ that with ‘ninety-three poets we are in almost a hopeless condition’. The writer, almost certainly a man, objected to importing poets rather than poetry. Settlers should not waste time scribbling poems when they could be getting on with their work, nor should judges waste money on ‘the miserable cudgel-brained rhyming submitted to them’.

Finally, at the end of October, the paper published the following lines:

_Epigram by the successful competitor of the Gawler Prize Poem_

A thousand faults the critics find,
To shreds and tatters rend it;
One only fault she find with thou –
'Tis that they can not mend it.

In early November the newspaper pleaded a shortage of space and the ‘immediate prospect of the English mail’ as the reason they would not be printing any further correspondence on the subject of the Gawler Poetry Prize. When a year later Caroline Carleton published _South Australian Lyrics_ a final carping note to the newspaper insisted that the author had ‘scarcely done herself justice in this selection’.

With the loss of her infant children on the outward journey, and finding herself in residence at the cemetery, it is hardly surprising that death finds its way into a number of Caroline Carleton’s poems. In ‘On the Suicide of a Young Lady’ her compassion for the victim is clear, as is her resignation in the face of prevailing social attitudes. ‘To look on life – yet long to die’ is the repeated refrain in another
poem, and yet others lyrically praise the country’s wildflowers, its radiant light and sparkling night skies.

In July 1861, Charles Carleton died of tuberculosis and Caroline appealed to the governor to appoint her as superintendent in his place. She had been running the cemetery throughout the final years of her husband’s illness, but the response from the chief secretary declared that the position ‘required an oversight and decision, such as no lady of education could be expected to possess’. Caroline pursued the matter but her appeal was rejected, and from fifteen applicants Henry Edward Brookes was chosen for the position.

Left without an income, Caroline Carleton took almost the only option available to educated women in straitened circumstances and opened a school on North Terrace. This was the first of a number of schools she ran, but none made a profit and with debts amounting to £107. 6s. 4d, and no assets, she was declared insolvent. Caroline retreated to Wallaroo, where her daughter, Amy, ran a school.

At Matta House near Kadina, she caught a fatal chill. The house was owned by the mining magnate William Horn, who probably knew Caroline Carleton through poetry circles in Adelaide. Despite his business interests Horn enjoyed poetry, and on his return to England he published Bush Echoes and Notes by a Nomad. Horn seems to have been of a benevolent nature, and the statue of Venus by the Italian sculptor, Antonio Canova, was one of three sculptures he donated to Adelaide. Matta House is now a museum.

Caroline’s only son, who had hoped to establish a business selling lemon syrup in the Northern Territory, became lost in the bush and perished shortly after his mother’s death at Kadina. He was twenty-two.

Members of the British royal family, including Queen Victoria, were presented with a copy of the music of ‘The Song of Australia’, and King Edward VII also requested a copy of Mrs Carleton’s book of poems. A recording of the song, made by Peter Dawson, would be played by ABC Adelaide each day to open its morning session.
A year before the Carletons moved to the cemetery the current system of rows and roads was drafted. Leaflets in a display case near the entrance contain a map. For a lunch-hour walk there are two spots within sight of the curator’s cottage where it is pleasant to sit and eat a sandwich. The picnic table beneath the big pine tree to the right of Road 1 is pleasantly shaded on a warm day, and as the tree also shelters one of my relatives by marriage I often linger in the vicinity. Maria Dailey became the second wife of my great-great-great grandfather, Elias Battley, and she is buried in the Dailey family plot on the north side of Road 1, on the corner of Path 4. I often wonder how Maria felt about her husband choosing to be buried at Clarendon beside the wife who had made the journey with him from England, but perhaps that was what second wives expected in the Victorian era.

It is a gentle stroll down Road 1 to where it eventually turns south, and on Path 38, beyond the first bend, stands an impressive sandstone memorial to the composer of the melody of the ‘The Song of Australia’, Carl Linger. Surrounded by an expanse of grass, adorned with commemorative plaques and a flagpole, the 2.5-metre-high obelisk is at the centre of what appears to be the largest single plot in the cemetery. The monument was erected in 1936 on the site of Linger’s neglected grave, the funds having been raised by public subscription. It was unveiled by the premier, Richard Layton Butler, before a large crowd, but in the years that followed it must have fallen into disrepair, for a further plaque notes that in 1995 it was restored with government assistance.

Carl Ferdinand August Linger was born in Berlin in 1810, the son of an engraver. He had won a reputation as a composer by the time he, his wife Wilhelmine, and his brother sailed for South Australia aboard the Princess Luise. The ship, under Captain Bohr, had been chartered by the Berlin Emigration Society, a group founded by brothers Richard and Otto Schomburgk, who were anxious to escape the unrest that had spread across Europe following the French Revolution. The passengers who embarked in Hamburg, although refugees, were drawn from the professions,