

Graham Hannaford, *A Good Sheep Run: Colonial Australia through Scottish Eyes*, Edmund & Alexander, Maitland, Australia, 2024; ISBN: 9780987535108; 319 pp.; paperback; RRP 49.95 AUD.

In putting together his new book, *A Good Sheep Run: Colonial Australia Through Scottish Eyes*, Graham Hannaford has cast new light on the background of White Australian history in the first part of the nineteenth century. It has been his objective to show why the items he has found in his study of the available records were of interest to their contemporary readers and might influence their behaviour. He is also anxious to identify the very different nature and purpose of the sources – letters in particular, can be written for widely different uses.

There were few resources from which British people could know what life was like and describe the circumstances in distant parts of the globe in the time before the late nineteenth century. Even by 1800 there were few local British newspapers and those that there were, were mostly owned by local landlords who had their own political objectives. For instance, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* was owned and run by the Chalmers family who had strong religious interests which they sought to extend to their compatriots. The most significant was Dr. Thomas Chalmers, born in 1780. He was appointed as the Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh in 1828 and became the first moderator of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843. Their objectives were to promote Protestant religious beliefs. Their main information about life in distant parts was derived from letters, most frequently from the private letters written from friends or acquaintances in the distant country sent to people they knew in the home country. Such accounts were more or less, substantial and designed to promote a particular image of the culture in the distant area.

Dr Hannaford has collected a range of letters published in different, mainly Scottish, local newspapers with different approaches. The John O’Groat Journal preferred the USA as a destination while the Inverness Courier, at some times, thought Australia was by and large desirable but at others was inclined to note its defects. The various newspapers describe various parts of Australia from the defined perspective of what are deemed ‘ordinary’ Scots who had either voluntarily or compulsorily emigrated there, and usually dispatched letters to acquaintances still in Scotland who were considering emigration.

The selection of letters starts in 1820 and ends in 1850. The purposes of the publications are in some cases seeking to promote the choice of Australia as the preferred place to select for emigration, or in others to emphasise the disadvantages attached to the settlements and the clear advantage of selecting instead, the areas of Canada or parts of the USA. In many instances the author was unknown. In some entries the journalist employing the material was anxious to assert the rapid growth in Australia of a sizeable society, which would be a pleasant culture for a new migrant to settle in. Most of the letters were written by men but Hannaford has found some composed by women who stress their well-being and the speed with which they found a husband. There is also a careful examination of the rumpus that surrounds the remarkable figure of Doctor John Dunmore Lang whose religious drive was reinforced with extreme political, economic and other aspects of influential government.

Hannaford considers both well-known letters which have been widely used before and those which are unfamiliar. He examines those which were reprinted in a number of different journals. The selection of letters in this period largely illustrates the historical explanation,

adopted by people such as Marjory Harper or Tom Devine, at the Scottish end. This has usually been governed by the belief that the local landowners could obtain a high return from the local land if the local peasants could be disposed of. Dispatching the common people somewhere very different seemed desirable to the well-established landowners.

Hannaford raises some hesitation about this interpretation. He examines the identity of each author with care, to indicate the nature of their approach, and discusses with equal care the implications of the commentary they provide. He starts with a widely re-used letter apparently from an identifiable convict (Turner) who displays interest in the Aborigines as well as the availability of the land in Australia. He goes on to a typical letter from an explorer underlining the resources the government will make available and then, to a missionary's view. Every letter has its particular value in contributing to the identification of distinct aspects of the countryside, and of ways of management such as the Australian Agricultural Society.

It is evident that while some letter writers are satisfied with the communities that were developing others are thoroughly dissatisfied with what they describe as 'the nature of the sweeping refuse of all the jails of Britain.' He also examines the ways in which the government described the place and its management to encourage emigration. The descriptions Hannaford selects are not confined to rural activities but consider in some detail the opportunities for workmen and women of all kinds. These are designed to encourage the younger members of the Society in Scotland to emigrate to Australia not anywhere else, despite its distance. A great number of the letters offer advice for the would-be settlers. They often also cast some description of the Aborigines who were a potential matter of concern but who are generally dismissed in the letters as idle but harmless. Occasionally reference is made to the Aborigines killing numbers of migrants and to the failure of the missionaries to convert them to Christianity. Those who set out on expeditions frequently spoke of Aborigines moving in the same directions and of their willingness to maintain a form of communication as they went.

Dr Hannaford is interested in the type of people that the letter writers of all sorts were concerned to involve and arrives at the conclusion that they were the middle class of society. People who had no secure or foreseeable employment are seen as likely to benefit from the potential resources the new society presented. Several of the authors add the attraction of the pleasure that the methods of work offer. The reward obtained adds to the reasons to migrate. The climate was seen as healthy and usually very acceptable although there were periods when the total absence of rain was criticised.

It must be said that the letters provide an extraordinarily wide range of views – careful selection of letters could produce a wholly one-sided description either pro the life or contra, but Dr Hannaford has avoided this trap and exhibited a balanced account. He is very clear that letters could often be 'encouraging but misleading,' giving an over-optimistic description of the Australian landscape. The letters of unhappy settlers are included alongside those of individuals well satisfied. The differences between different areas are made clear. He also offers a balanced view underlining the importance of religion to many of the nineteenth century people and therefore the significance of the Presbyterian conflicts which are described in some letters. The availability of religious services, admired in some letters and denigrated in others where it is seen as scarcely existing, is clearly shown to be a critical element of a satisfactory community.

He notes the attempt that some emigrants made to set up a Gaelic enclave seeking to be settled together so that they might maintain a single language and form of religion. While this was not achieved there was, it was claimed, a weekly provision of a sermon in Gaelic in Sydney.

Hannaford extends his analysis to the different colonies and areas involved in the period – examining with some care what accounts were given of Hobart and Tasmania as well as the continental settlements. Nearly every letter includes some reflection on the widespread availability of land, which was more-or-less free from sale, and which would rapidly grow to become a fortune. Some of the letters assert that the fortune Australia represented was surprisingly much higher than the value of the American colonies and those elsewhere. Sydney is seen as being equal to any Scottish town except Glasgow. This helped provide the basis for claiming that someone who came with a little money would be able to make a fortune in a short while. Anyone ‘will be rewarded far beyond what he can by any possibility obtain at home’. Hannaford reproduces several letters that make this case. There is an assumption that these will be a superior class of emigrant. Hannaford suggests from later letters that those earlier emigrants now sought to draw considerably more numbers of migrants from Scotland to rapidly increase in output.

At the same time some letters argued that a peaceful regime with the Aboriginals was being established. Clearly this was true for some individuals who were learning the Aboriginal languages and getting some work done but in 1839 it was clear that this did not apply in NSW where Aboriginals had been massacred. The subsequent conviction and execution of the culprits was seen to be significant for the British martial law.

One aspect of Australia in the period that is mentioned in most of the letters throughout the period under review is its suitability for sheep farming and sometimes also cattle farming in all its various shapes and sizes. By the end of the work Hannaford has set his colonies on the clear route to an obvious development of animal husbandry in all its forms in the later nineteenth century.

Dr Hannaford’s book makes for some most interesting reading. It is a well written book, that tells a story. *A Good Sheep Run* demonstrates close attention to detail and hours of rigorous research with newspapers, in particular. The interesting and diverse letters are given their full context in the work. The story according to Hannaford (stated on the back cover), is “presented for the general reader interested in the history of both Australia and Scotland, but without the appearance of an academic work entailing footnotes (they do exist) or an extensive bibliography (again, it exists, but not here). This is a story worth reading.

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