

Parkes, Customs and the literati

Father of Federation, Sir Henry Parkes was a member of the early Australian group of literati. He began creating poetry before arriving in Australia and published a book of sonnets in 1842 while serving as a Customs officer in Sydney.

The collection of sonnets titled "Stolen Moments" was dedicated to Lieutenant-Colonel John Gibbes, who had arrived in 1834 to take charge of Sydney Customs House.

While on board an American ship anchored in Sydney cove Parkes wrote this poem which was included in "Stolen Moments".

STANZAS,

Up go the beautiful and world-watch'd stars,
Lifting the glory of America,
'Mong the red flags which gleam through masts
and spars
Crowded in gay magnificence, to-day,
Where three score years ago, none found their way,
Of all the ships which left old England's shore:
Up goes the starry flag, on waves which lay
In undiscover'd solitude, when o'er
America those stars first glanc'd from fields of gore!

In friendly beauty floats that free-fix'd flag
'Gainst England's glowing ensign! I could dream
Of times, when the wild bush, each uncouth crag,
And precipice, beside this haven-stream,
Shall yield to one vast city; and the gleam
Of new-born banners shall illumine it;
And these alike be foreign in the beam
Of Australasia's morning. Heaven admit
One patriot spirit here, and Freedom's fires are lit!

Not ever shall the exile's toil be all
To bring the harvest of this infant land;
The children of the buried exile shall
Behold a mother's beauty, in the bland
Aspect of Nature, on their native strand:
And Freedom then shall choose a dwelling here.
Oh! Happy epoch, when the "great and grand,"
The memory of whose deeds mankind revere,
Number a Washington, from the world's Austral sphere.

From Stolen Moments, published 1842, by permission of the National Library of Australia.

Duncan's newspaper "Weekly register of politics, facts and general literature".

During the early years it had become almost a tradition for prominent men from the field of literature and arts to work with Customs. The financial security and relatively short hours suited these men who could then also pursue their creative and political interests. Parkes was one of these men. Another was Frederick Garling, a landing surveyor with Customs, who perfected his watercolours of life on the harbour. Duncan, yet another, had found his feet in Australia, but was saved from bankruptcy in 1846, by being selected as Customs sub-collector at Moreton Bay. He used his official position, over the years, as a platform for his political aims.

For five years, from 1840 to 1845, Parkes spent time aboard many vessels carrying goods from countries trying to gain a foothold in the growing market place of Australia.

Parkes' time as a tide waiter was not wasted. Other than his writings it gave him the opportunity to learn the "politics" of life in Australia. It gave him a good knowledge of the complexities of the six differing tariff regimes in the colonies and the problems of inter-colonial border controls. It possibly spurred him on to his dream of federation.

An anonymous letter printed in Duncan's Weekly Register put an end to Parkes' career as a tide waiter. An article appeared in 1845 that alleged a Customs messenger was "exerting inordinate influence" in the Custom House, particularly

Parkes was employed by Gibbes as a casual tide waiter, stationed aboard vessels in the harbour, checking for smugglers and carrying out clearance duties.

Parkes arrived in Australia in 1839, first moving to the bush where he did not flourish. He moved to Sydney where he found a like-minded friend, William Duncan—a journalist and publisher. Duncan encouraged members of the local literati and soon Parkes' poetry began appearing in

with Thomas Jeffrey. Gibbes sent messengers to Duncan, who was pressured into revealing the author—it was of course Parkes. Gibbes immediately approached Parkes who explained that the reason he had written to the Weekly Register rather than report the matter to Gibbes was because of his knowledge of the matter and that he was sure he would not receive justice from Jeffrey. Parkes believed Gibbes also would not hear of the situation.

Because of the explanation, Parkes was suspended by Gibbes rather than dismissed. Parkes resigned before the suspension was lifted. After his resignation, Parkes said he was: "far better off than I ever was before in my life and my prospects are very flattering".

After his resignation from Customs, Parkes, in 1850, established his own newspaper "The Empire" which became a powerful voice of democracy. Parkes himself focussed on reform in many areas of Australian life, including education and free trade.

In 1868, Parkes became involved in a dispute between the now promoted Collector of Customs, Duncan, and then-Treasurer Eagar. During this dispute, Parkes penned what was to signify the delineation of power between government and the public service. Following the suspension of Duncan by Eagar, Parkes wrote to Duncan advising: "governments must govern and it is not for the servants of government, whatever their rank, to dictate the course of action which should be pursued".

Until this time, Customs reported directly to the Governor or the Premier and exerted considerable influence in government. From this time on, Customs became the servant of government.

Long an advocate of free trade between colonies, Parkes identified federation as the best means of achieving this aim. Following a report on defence by Major-General Edwards that recommended the federalisation of colonial troops, Parkes seized the opportunity to appeal for federal political union as a means of achieving free trade among the colonies.

During the period 1891-1896, Parkes focused on federation, with the slogan One People, One Destiny.

Further money troubles and ill health plagued Parkes until he died in poverty on 27 April 1896, he was buried at Faulconbridge in the Blue Mountains. His free trade dream among Federated States took another four years to eventuate.

Parkes was a man of strong views particularly about the rights of people and literacy, for most of his parliamentary career he was a champion of them. He was quick to recognise the need for federation and when he saw that it had become possible he fought strongly for it.

His indomitable character raised Parkes from a humble labourer to the office of Premier of his colonial "State". His recognition of the broader issues required for a great movement like federation had an immense effect when the fate of federation was in doubt, turning the tide in its favour.

The work of Parkes gives this "view" of an early Sydney.

SONNET

When you arrive at Sydney, sailing up
The harbour, a small central isle you'll see;
With two or three low huts, but not a tree,
Nor blade of grass,—upon't; and, on the top,
A score of men, in coarse habiliments,
Hewing the rock away. You may remember,
Among the many evil-traced events
Of a town life, some robbery, when December
Brought on the long, dark nights—a neighbour's boy
Tried for't, and banished. He, perchance, is one,
Who yonder lift the pickaxe in the sun
To level Pinchgut Island! If e'er joy
Gladden'd your heart on England's shore, oh! Never
Forget that Englishmen are banished here for ever.

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Other information sourced from David Day's *Smugglers and Sailors; Contraband and Controversy*.