

AUSTRALIAN RELIEF FOR THE LANCASHIRE VICTIMS OF THE COTTON FAMINE, 1862-1863

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*They are martyrs of the cause which every patriot
regards as his own.*

ONE of the most important consequences of the decision by the Northern forces in the American Civil War to blockade the ports of the Confederates was a rapid dwindling in the supplies of raw cotton to the mills of Lancashire. On 10 January 1862, the *Sydney Morning Herald* drew attention to the prospects which would be faced in the cotton-manufacturing towns of England should the anticipated shortage of raw material become a fact. The problem was left unconsidered for almost six months, and when re-opened, the question had become part of the general Australian interest in contemporary British policy towards the American Civil War. The English mail, which arrived about the middle of July, brought along with the latest reports on the progress of the war the first news of the widespread distress which was beginning to manifest itself in the English cotton towns, and within a very few days the news was being discussed in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland.

Newspaper reaction to the situation, at least in New South Wales and Victoria, had certain common characteristics. Writers approved Britain's non-intervention policy and, though they realised the economic implications of such action by Britain, the people of the two most important colonies endorsed the British policy unreservedly. In so doing, they took upon themselves a measure of responsibility for meeting the unpleasant consequences. Rarely, claimed the *Argus* on 1 August 1862, had the nation exhibited an example of so much greatness and nobility, and it was quite clear, said the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that the suffering endured by the people of the cotton districts was for the nation at large, and for the great principle of non-intervention.⁽¹⁾ Neither satisfaction with the British stand nor admiration for the "Spartan fortitude" of the Lancashire cotton spinners was considered to be enough; almost

⁽¹⁾ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 1862.

simultaneously sympathy and admiration were made into something more than a moral responsibility. The justness of the British cause, the patience of the Lancashire spinners, the responsibilities which lay before Australians, all these were linked together firmly, and commended persistently to the readers of most metropolitan newspapers.

Similarly, there was a general realisation that bad as the situation might be in July, it could hardly fail to become worse as the British winter approached and the American struggle came no nearer an end. Reinforced with references to previous performances by the Australian colonies on behalf of the Patriotic Fund (Crimean War) and the Indian Relief Fund of 1858, with campaigns in many cases sponsored or initiated by the Press, this recognition of the extreme urgency of action had the effect of ensuring that in all the colonies except South Australia, the relief funds were well under way before the end of July 1862. In South Australia, both the news of the calamity and the press comment upon it were delayed considerably, but once established, the organisers made a conscious effort to regain lost time. Although one Tasmanian paper, the *Launceston Examiner*, lost its initial enthusiasm very quickly and on 14 July thought it better to direct the charity nearer home, this view was quite exceptional. For the entire period of the English winter continual references occurred to the hardships of those in Lancashire and reminders were frequent that, in those circumstances, the relief work of the Australian colonies could never be considered as finished. In some places, South Australia in particular, these appeals had no effect in reviving interest in a cause long dead, but in the areas where the support was strongest, notably Sydney, their sincerity and effect is quite obvious. Even after the upheavals and bitterness over the alleged misapplication of the New South Wales funds, the *Sydney Morning Herald* could ask on 27 January 1863, whether anyone could regret that the funds had been sent, considering the grim prospect of winter.

Where the early backing of the Press was secured, the intensity with which the opening stages of the campaign were conducted is quite remarkable, and any attempt to criticise the sentiments expressed, or to be derogatory at the expense of the morals of the movement was countered invariably with considerable vigour and decision. At the Sydney public meeting which inaugurated the movement in New South Wales, David Buchanan propounded a scheme whereby the funds raised recently for a statue of the Prince Consort should be diverted to the use of this charity. The *Sydney Morning Herald* next

morning, 21 July 1862, could hardly contain itself in that it should have been possible for the meeting to be "so insulted by a felonious proposition, and thus, for a moment, distracted from that holy occupation which brought it together". In the capital of each colony a general meeting was the event which marked the inception of the movement and gave it its official patronage, though in each case the meeting was preceded by a certain amount of groundwork undertaken spontaneously by interested parties. Each meeting took a standard form. First it was addressed by the governor of the colony, the mayor of the town, members of the Legislature and prominent citizens; then each meeting passed a series of resolutions expressing admiration for and sympathy with the Lancashire operatives, stating the responsibility felt by the colonists towards relieving this distress and undertaking to put suitable schemes in hand. Every meeting seems to have broken up in an atmosphere of determination and purpose almost equal to a minor crusade. Similar public meetings were held in many small country towns, purely as a result of local interest and initiative. Attendances were generally small, and the meetings were often presided over by a local clergyman. Those in attendance seem to have been sufficiently generous, but the response amongst the rest of the townspeople was frequently poor. Neither the size of the community nor the warmth of the response made it necessary to arrange elaborate systems for collection in these small centres, but this was far from the case in the larger towns.

In each large town sub-committees were formed to devise the most comprehensive scheme possible. Appeals were sent to certain public bodies and various sections of the community.⁽²⁾ The clergy seem to have made a special effort, both inside and out of church. Work done in Sunday schools and amongst church congregations formed a major part of the movement in Tasmania; in Adelaide not only did the clergy run the sub-committee for the southern part of the city, but the Rev. John Watsford of Pirie Street Chapel preached a special sermon which was "characterised by great ability, and was delivered with all the speaker's fervid eloquence." Nor were the clergy behindhand in devising means of raising funds. In Tasmania, the elocution classes run by the Rev. R. K. Ewing gave one of their popular entertainments; at Port Elliot, the Rev. R. W. Newland presided over a *soirée* and concert. One fairly successful means of raising funds was the

⁽²⁾ At Adelaide, for example, the millers were asked for contributions of flour. *South Australian Advertiser*, 5 September 1862.

use of all forms of charitable entertainment, and these ranged from a production of *The Rivals* given under vice-regal patronage to the very popular "amateur Ethiopian entertainment." Special appeals were sent to colonial "operatives" to help their fellows in England. In at least one case a plan was devised for weekly contributions to the Relief Fund, while the distribution of contribution forms to large and small firms alike was even considered. In a letter to the Melbourne *Argus* signed by "A few working men," it was suggested that a workmen's subscription list should be opened to cater for sums varying from 1d. to 5/-, but in Sydney, where a meeting of the iron trades held on 21 July had decided to issue subscription books for distribution in the various workshops, the response was so poor that it had to be left to each to do his best independently.

The fate of the iron trades' appeal was not typical of the general history of the Relief Fund in Sydney. In no other colony was the public meeting so lively or the response so great as in New South Wales and nowhere else was the interest so sustained, even though towards the end it became more critical in its attitude. Even by 22 July, £5,200 had been raised, most of which had been secured inside two days. "Never was an appeal of this kind more promptly responded to," said the Sydney *Empire* on the same day, and when the total finally passed the £20,000 mark, the inhabitants of Sydney could reflect that it was a remarkable achievement, considering that the movement had come to rely more on spontaneous enthusiasm than on a carefully worked out method of procedure. In Melbourne, too, the subscription list was opened within a few hours of the arrival of the mail, and £500 was collected as the nucleus of a larger fund. The Melbourne committee arranged to canvass the suburbs, leaving the outer areas in charge of selected local people. Brisbane, on the other hand, waited for the *Courier* to hint at the desirability of convening a public meeting, a hint which seems to have been prompted by the false belief that Melbourne had already contributed £14,000. But when the committee finally got into action, the campaign was conducted with some thoroughness. Adelaide was supreme in the carefulness with which it planned proceedings. There was every hope that the large sums sent already to England by New South Wales and Victoria would be followed by a proportionate contribution from South Australia; for here was a committee, willing to plan and work with great earnestness, which realised the foolishness of over-reliance on individual spontaneity, and which worked with unflagging

effort and perseverance over a period of fully nine months. Nevertheless the contributions came in slowly, falling far short of the original estimate. The committee resolved to make a renewed effort at the end of the year; unfortunately this failed also, and it is not hard to detect the feeling of hopelessness with which the committee decided to wind up proceedings with the total at just over £4,000, on the understanding that, should the position in Lancashire deteriorate further towards the end of the year, another effort might be made.⁽³⁾ Only in the Launceston district of Tasmania does there seem to have been any positive hostility to collections being made.

At this date, with the meagre surviving evidence, and the small amount of biographical research available in Australia, it is very hard to judge whether these general appeals for funds represent the work of a sectional interest. It is very infrequently that the possibilities stand out so clearly as they do in the Launceston area where the appeal was made by a Lancastrian to "all the Lancashire lads and lasses on the northern side of Tasmania. . . ."⁽⁴⁾ Where lists of committees exist, and where biographical details are available, both Lancastrians as well as those who claim some acquaintance with Lancashire are to be found. But this is no more than is to be expected; what is more interesting is the question of the degree to which the movement depended on one or more sections of the community and the extent to which support was made up by those who had come out recently from England. Again, these are facts which can never be determined precisely; but certain indications do exist. Though the participants in the meetings and the committees were mainly men in public positions and business, the general support was very broadly based. The overriding impression remains, however, that varied in type and occupation as were its supporters, the movement was one inspired by and directed at those who had known England. More than a hint of this is contained in the attitude which led the *Sydney Morning Herald* to declare on 19 July 1862, "We shall not be able to communicate to the native born the thrill of emotion when England suffers. We cannot make them understand how much is implied by the Shamrock, the Rose and the Thistle, but we can at least teach them the lessons of patriotism, second in worth only to the lessons of humanity, by showing them how deeply it is engraven on our souls."

⁽³⁾ *South Australian Advertiser*, 16 April 1863.

⁽⁴⁾ *Launceston Examiner*, 5 August 1862.

As soon as the Funds in the various colonies were instituted, discussion began on the best means of distributing the money. Two alternatives presented themselves; it could be sent either for use in the immediate relief of physical distress, or for use in assisting those who so desired to come to Australia. In the discussions on these alternatives, there can be detected a certain pride that the Australian colonies were in a position to offer to help England and a belief, or at least a hope, that this assistance would do something to raise the colonies in the estimation of those at home. Thus the Brisbane committee arranged for four thousand copies of the proceedings at the public meeting to be sent to their agent, Jordan, for distribution in Lancashire. In Adelaide, the *Register* stressed that no opportunity should be lost of striving to impress on those at home the fact that Australian wealth and prosperity were rapidly increasing. Sydney, of course, was the most sensitive of all to the possibilities in this direction, in view of the treatment which New South Wales had been receiving until recently in England. As the *Empire* pointed out on 22 July 1862, "Whenever again the ungrateful traducer may strive to blacken the name of this colony by representing its people as dishonourable and anti-English in character, such falsehoods will not be received in Lancashire."

The ideas of assisting migration, and of providing immediate relief for Lancashire's suffering were of parallel growth in the colonies, for both forms of assistance were discussed as early as the inaugural public meetings in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. In Tasmania and Melbourne the question was raised soon afterwards, but only in Launceston and Adelaide was there any show of an uncompromising attitude. Almost a year after the fund had been opened it was still being suggested that the most effective way of giving relief would be to direct some of the supposed flood of immigrants to Tasmania, where they could grow cotton, and the *Launceston Examiner* pointed out rather sharply on 25 July 1863 that while every other colony was trying actively to secure a share of any such immigrants, no effort was being made on behalf of Tasmania. Contrasting with this, in Adelaide the public meeting agreed with the resolution of Augustine Stowe which declared, *inter alia* that immigration should not be confused with the provision of relief, and that there was no justice in bringing out to South Australia people who were not adapted to the requirements of colonial life. On a test case of £150 which had been sent to the fund for the purpose of assisting immigrants, the majority of the committee decided that the Adelaide

enterprise was purely benevolent in character, and had nothing to do with the question of immigration.

Between these two extremes came Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. The Brisbane meeting started off strongly in favour of fostering immigration, but when the approach of winter was stressed, and the audience reminded that it was unwise to attempt to force people out against their will, the operative resolution was amended to leave the application of funds to the discretion of Jordan, the Queensland immigration agent in England. Funds for both purposes seem to have been sent eventually. In Melbourne, despite early suggestions that immigration might be the most satisfactory remedy, the covering letter that went with the first remittance stated that the subscribers left their agents unfettered as to the mode of distribution, simply stating that in their opinion the claims of the homeless and starving were entitled to priority of relief. The position was very similar in Sydney, except that there the question was discussed more vigorously, mainly because of the larger scale of the movement. In spite of an impromptu offer by the Rev. Thomas Smith,

Oh let us write them come here,
Where, for honesty's sons, there's always good cheer;
We've plenty of money and plenty of land,
And all that we want are the Lancashire hands,

the meeting resolved that Sir Daniel Cooper, Edward Hamilton and James McArthur should be requested to act on behalf of New South Wales, and that they should be authorised to distribute from time to time the amounts forwarded "in such a manner as may seem to them best calculated to meet the pressing necessities of those who stand in need of assistance."⁽⁵⁾ The same day's issue of the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the support for assisted immigration and for an unconditional remittance was about equal. In the closing stages of the movement, however, there was a general trend towards advocating the provision of some form of assisted immigration as the only really effective solution. The *South Australian Register*, which had always advocated such immigration, reiterated the point, which at that time was a very telling one in Adelaide, that public benevolence in Lancashire and elsewhere could not be expected to continue so freely, and that some other scheme would have to be worked out. Similarly in Melbourne, the *Argus* declared that there could be no doubt

⁽⁵⁾ *Empire*, 21 July 1862.

that the best way in which Australia could give relief would be to help some of the distressed to come over to Australia. This, it considered, was the only way in which relief could be more than temporary. This point of view found an increasing number of adherents in Sydney also. The commotion over the spending of the New South Wales contribution, along with the breaking-down in self-control of the Lancashire mill-workers, which seems to have been a quality genuinely admired in the Australian colonies, induced the *Sydney Morning Herald* to observe on 14 May 1863 that the question now arose as to whether or not it was the proper time to attempt to create a channel for the outflow of the population, and the conviction gradually spread that this was the shape that any further effort for the relief of the distress should take.

One thing emerges clearly from all this. At no time was there any suggestion that the funds contributed should be used to further any private charity or schemes of benefaction, despite the fact that several philanthropists had been associated with the movement in Australia. It was undeniable that the agents in England had been allowed to use their own discretion in the application of relief, but the apparent abuse of trust by the New South Wales agents provoked the most dramatic incident in the history of the movement. On 16 December 1862, the *Empire* printed some correspondence which had been sent to Sydney by the agents for the relief fund in England. Amongst other items, it declared that, "In taking upon ourselves the responsibility of distributing the money for special purposes, we were desirous of making the liberal contributions of our colony to bear a special value beyond its monetary value." To bring this about, the agents had decided to make over the money to a scheme for establishing day schools, providing classes in practical subjects, paying school pence for destitute children and giving material aid through well-organised local committees; this system had been sponsored by Sir J. P. Kay-Shuttleworth. The effect of this statement was immediate and spectacular. The *Empire*, which took upon itself the main burden of prosecution, declared on the following day that the correspondence revealed a "gross violation of a sacred trust"; not a farthing of the £20,000 was to be used to relieve the starvation of 400,000 fellow-subjects, but rather it was to be used as a means of carrying out "the crochets of a servile pedantry." Who was to blame, asked the *Empire* sternly, the Sydney committee or the New South Wales agents in England? It was to be hoped that the Sydney committee could clear itself of the charge of sanctioning this mis-

appropriation. On the same day, a meeting was held at the Town Hall, which decided to form a sub-committee to examine the documents received. Despite an attempt by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to introduce a more temperate note into the inquiries, the sub-committee reported in an atmosphere of considerable tension. The sub-committee declared that it had no doubt that the money had not been used in the manner intended by subscribers, or in accordance with the instructions forwarded with each remittance, and further that the money so far spent on educational purposes should be refunded by those who allowed its misuse. The 26 December was fixed as the date for a public meeting, and the proceedings at this gathering were far from dispassionate. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* report of this meeting, the attendance, unlike that of the inaugural meeting, included a large proportion of those who always appeared at political gatherings and of those always ready to call to account people accused of delinquency. Various people blamed in turn the vague instructions of the Sydney Committee, Sir J. P. Kay-Shuttleworth and the Australian agents. Mr. Justice Wise was almost alone in his reasonable defence of the agents, and condemnation carried the day. Backing for the educational scheme was regarded as a departure from the terms of the subscription, which were considered to be clearly stated as a desire to assist in the immediate relief of personal suffering.

The affair did not go unnoticed in the neighbouring colonies, but whenever an opinion was expressed it did not take seriously the more dramatic side of the discontent in Sydney. The version which reached Brisbane seems to have dwelt on the more lurid side of the affair, with talk of experiments in juvenile education, a desire to secure a distinctive reputation for New South Wales, and the seeking after baronetcies and knighthoods. On the other hand, the *Argus* in Melbourne on 29 December was very careful to distinguish between the accounts as chronicled in the *Empire*, and the more sober comments of the *Sydney Morning Herald*—"The *Empire* echoes the measureless condemnation of the excited contributors, which the *Herald* moderates by bringing facts and commonsense to bear on the subject." While agreeing with the view that it came as a disappointment to find that the original Australian hope of giving immediate relief had been frustrated, both in Melbourne and Brisbane it was maintained that Shuttleworth's scheme could give relief very ably and, in keeping with the recognised character of the mill-workers, save them from the demoralising effects of idleness, without

wounding their independence. In the same issue of 29 December, the *Argus* stated quite definitely that short of assisting immigration, it would not be sorry to learn that the Victorian contributions had been so well-bestowed as those from New South Wales.

Nevertheless, despite such understanding comments as these, the old atmosphere and purpose had been destroyed. A further donation of £20 by the governor and an effort by the *Empire* to re-direct attention to the privations of what it estimated at 600,000 people failed to revive an enterprise which, already losing its early vigour, had suffered a most damaging blow. A reaction had set in against this particular form of relief in favour of assisted immigration. This tendency appeared in other colonies also, but was quite marked in Sydney. Apart from sporadic rumblings by the *Empire* over "Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth and his heartless gang" and attempts to revive the issue at intervals, the movement gradually faded out in New South Wales, until on 12 March 1863 even the *Empire* brought itself to say rather sadly that, if the inhabitants of the colony had raised a fund expressly for the purpose of bringing out some of the distressed families to a land of plenty, the result would have been much more satisfactory. Once this view became generally accepted, it could only mean that so long as the movement for Lancashire relief adhered to its earlier form, it would never again command the popular enthusiasm which had marked its beginnings so spectacularly.

The historical position of the movement is not easily determined. As a part of the general background to the history of the cotton famine, and as a slight illumination of local politics and social life, its interest is obvious enough. But has the movement any significance in the broader stream of history? A comparison of this enterprise with the Funds of 1855 and 1858 only serves to put into stronger relief the general enthusiasm and spontaneity of the Lancashire Relief work. Undoubtedly the great increase in the population of the Australian colonies which took place between 1850 and 1860 included a considerable proportion of people from England, and any calamity which struck England was likely to produce a correspondingly warmer response for sentimental and even personal reasons. Thus expressions of attachment to England reach a new peak in 1862-3, and the theme of the *Empire* that "so sad and mournful a picture as this brings home to us the thrilling truth that 'blood is thicker than water',"⁽⁶⁾ was repeated generally by leader writers and prominent citizens alike.

⁽⁶⁾ *Empire*, 15 July 1862.

Closely connected with this sentiment was another, less frequently stated and at times confused in the minds of those who wrote about it. Recognition of imperial ties or even a form of imperial responsibility can be found at times in the discussions surrounding the Crimean War, Indian Mutiny and the New Zealand War, but during the entire period of the Lancashire relief schemes these points of view were regularly expressed. Perhaps the epitome of all the colonial pride, the sentiment for Britain and the later political imperialisms is to be found in the paragraph of a leading article which appeared in the *Empire* on 14 July 1862; "This is a case in which the inclinations of the community will accord with its duties and responsibilities, and where few suggestions will be needed, and small advocacy required to bring a response from the hearts and pockets of the colonists, which will show the people in the old country that they need not be ashamed of that New Britannia which is springing up in the South Pacific." Lancashire's distress compelled those Australian colonists who were concerned about the situation to take stock of their attitude towards the tie with Britain. The basis of this could remain the narrow one of constitutional and sentimental attachment, or could be broadened into one of more measured responsibility as the Pacific representatives of a great imperial union. At this time, the latter concept was in no way a settled idea, but its origins can be discerned in the background and are too numerous not to be significant. This leading article from the *Empire* boldly expressed the idea even before the Australian colonies began seriously to encounter the constitutional problems inherent in their position in the South Seas, and twenty years before the wholesale intrusion of western political control into the island world brought this and other issues into the forefront of public discussion. Annexation of the islands, imperial federation, the Soudan contingent and naval defence, all these issues lay far ahead in the turbulent 'eighties, but the relationship of the Lancashire Relief movement to the question of Imperial connection is sufficiently strong to make a startlingly early reference to Imperial Federation in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 4 April 1857 seem to be not so strange a historical freak as at first sight it might appear.

