

Charles Todd - The Weatherman from Greenwich

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Charles Todd gained widespread fame for his work on the international telegraph and was knighted by Queen Victoria. He was also the first Government Astronomer and Meteorologist in South Australia and became Postmaster-General as well. A scientist, a philosopher and a devoted husband and father, his pioneering work remains important today.

To know and understand the people of our past, we need to put them within the context of their times because the world around them influenced them and helped to form their views. When Charles Todd was born, the Industrial Revolution was having a dramatic effect on all areas of life. The whole social fabric was evolving. These changes all influenced him greatly.

South Australia was the place where Todd made his home, so the book looks at the colony and how it developed. Like him, the first settlers had come from Britain. By the time he arrived, they had forged a different and vibrant community. He had to learn their attitudes and their ways. He found it an exciting challenge.

Because the book is about people and daily life, it tells us a lot more as well and what the world Charles lived in was like. By learning about that world, we learn a lot more about Charles himself too. Knowing the background to his life helps us to appreciate him and his contribution to South Australia as this new society developed.

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution was bringing about change at a breathtaking pace. Steam engines were becoming more powerful, more compact and portable. By the time Charles was ten years old, railways were changing concepts of distance with their speed and efficiency. Within another year or two the electric telegraph was transforming the sharing of ideas. Relationships between the classes were changing and ordinary people were demanding rights and equality. It was an exciting time for many people.

People in South Australia

Henry Hussey arrived as a boy, in 1839, and later wrote about his life. His lively account is told here. He brings alive the times and the world that Charles came to. It wasn't an entirely male-dominated world either. Matilda Evans wrote hugely successful novels about life in the colony. Catherine Helen Spence did as well and she became a newspaper commentator and an important political figure too. Eliza Day wasn't as respectable. She drank too much, swore a lot and would go after a person with an axe if she felt wronged, but she played a significant role. At one stage, she owned at least twenty houses rented out as brothels. Moralists may disapprove, but she looked after her tenants and provided some stability and security for them.

Religion

Some histories suggest that in the 19th century everyone was religious and went to church. This wasn't true. A national survey in 1851 found that 42% of British citizens didn't attend church. Among those that did, the Deists thought that the bible was twaddle. Unitarians believed that the idea of a godly trinity was simply wrong. Not all Quakers were Christian. There were Unitarians, Quakers, Agnostics and Atheists among the first settlers in South Australia and a determination that there would not be an established church as there was in England.

Sex

In the early colony, most lived moral lives but attitudes were fairly relaxed and local newspapers reported the latest scandals in great detail. It was certainly not a repressed society. The age of consent was ten, prostitution was legal and brothels were common. Some claimed using their services was only a minor sin as it satisfied a man's natural urges.

Astronomy

In the 19th century, knowing the correct time was essential for safe navigation. It was as important for shipping then as radar and global positioning are today. Studying stars was the only way to do this. That was why the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, Charles workplace and the most prestigious observatory in the world, came under the control of the Admiralty. And that was why Charles Todd was appointed the Government Astronomer in South Australia.

The Electric Telegraph

The first patent for an electric telegraph had been issued in 1837 to William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone. The development of the technology over many years makes a fascinating story. Even the false claims of Samuel Morse are intriguing. One of Todd's tasks was to install an electric telegraph from Adelaide to Port Adelaide. He had been closely involved with the technology in England and he knew William Cooke.

South Australia Was Different

South Australia was different from other Australian colonies. It was the only one to be authorised by an Act of Parliament and was the only one in which there were not a lot more men than women. Officially there weren't any convicts either, but that was debatable. The colony nearly failed in its first years, then the discovery of copper saved it. By the time Charles arrived, Adelaide was a prosperous and growing community. The people who came to South Australia expected to work; they hoped to make money. Unlike Britain, there was no self-righteous aristocracy and there were no indigent poor. It was a place where people had reason to hope that their efforts would be successful.

All about the weather and day-to-day life as well

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