

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA TO LAUNCH DR ALISON
ALEXANDER'S BOOK, 'SOUTHERN MIDLANDS A HISTORY,
OATLANDS 5TH OCTOBER 2012**

This is a really beautiful book. I love it. Congratulations Dr Alexander. It is a fine addition to your considerable body of work, which I know includes numerous other municipalities and also local histories as diverse as the zinc works and football - not to mention wives and mistresses of colonial Governors. As I have stated in my Foreword to the book, *The Southern Midlands: a History* is meticulously researched and skillfully structured and does full justice to the rich and diverse history of the area.

I suppose I should begin by referring to one of my predecessors, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who of course in 1821 chose the site of Oatlands as one of four major towns-to-be along the north-south route, and which by 1835 had as its population some 600 free settlers and that number again of convicts and no less than 200 buildings, of which seven were hotels.

That all suggests prosperity and good times - but I think we all know the early decades were pretty tough. The intimate and interesting tone of the book is set by a reference on page 4 to Governor Macquarie's 1821 trip to Van Dieman's Land and early settlers at Bagdad, Thomas and Elizabeth Hayes, and their children - any of their descendants here? Don't be too quick to put up your

hand ... for it appears that Macquarie stayed at Mrs Hayes's overnight and later wrote that it was, and I quote, "by far the worst of his accommodation on the whole journey."

And are any descendants of Joe Wright here? At York Plains the first settler there, Joe Wright, ran an inn. I quote: "Wright's house was reputed to be a meeting place for cattle and sheep thieves, 'where many a good fat steer has been salted down'. Wright, known as Mad Joe, drank heavily, and made travellers patronise his house at gunpoint. He lost his inn and land, and in 1823 was running cattle at Jericho, trying to make the storekeeper accept his rotten beef by threatening to cut his head off."

Dr Alexander's account gives us a measure of how tough it must have been by describing that not only were those early settlers and convicts left to live or die by their wits at the furthest edge of the world, but their fledgling society, as a wool-based export economy, was almost entirely at the mercy of conditions in Europe, and there were plenty of boom-bust cycles.

To illustrate this:

"A farm would have a cottage built of sods, logs or mud, thatched with straw; a pigsty made of logs; disgusting piles of wool, bones, sheepskins and manure; heaps of ploughs, harrows, carts and firewood; quarters

of mutton or kangaroo hanging from a tree; dogs barking and 'idlers' lounging about..."

But the other hand there is this description:

"The largest Bagdad property was Shene, bought in the 1830s by Hobart lawyer Gamaliel Butler." (I served my apprenticeship as a law clerk with his great grandson Eustice Gamaliel Butler.) The account continues, "Shene was famous, not for its fairly ordinary house, but for its stables, designed by Gamaliel's son Francis ... Shene was an impressive property, with a dwelling house, dairy, granary, wood shed, barn, stables, coach house, stores, mens' cottages etc."

Dr Alexander reports that there was a sprinkling of professionals in the Van Diemen's Land decades. I was intrigued to read that early doctors in the southern midlands tended to be doctors-turned-farmers who rendered medical assistance to their neighbours when called upon to do so, and their services were sometimes engaged part-time by the government. One such was Dr John Hudspeth, who had taken up a land grant at Jericho. Others were Dr Thomas Gorringe at Green Ponds, Dr Espie at Bagdad, Dr Desailly at Bagdad, and at Oatlands Dr Alexander McNab and Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall.

On one unfortunate occasion, “Bushrangers tricked Dr Hudspeth of Jericho. Mrs George, the storekeeper’s wife, was about to have a baby, and a man gave Dr Hudspeth a message that he was wanted. He went to the George’s house, but found they had sent no message. ‘My God, I am a ruined man,’ he exclaimed – he realised it was a trick by bushrangers and got home to find it stripped of everything valuable.”

The Midlands Highway is of course a major feature of this book and your world, and its origin is fascinating. I have already referred to Governor Macquarie. Another early identity in its making was Major Bell, who over three years had convicts construct a road that was considered “rough, muddy and far too steep ... totally unfit for travelling, with many hills which could have been avoided.” (There are some who might be tempted to say – ‘still is’) The problem, apparently, as stated by the author was that “Bell was a soldier, not an engineer, and built his road straight, ignoring hills.”

As to the road itself, which we take for granted, in its earliest incarnation was built on misery: “Convicts who misbehaved were punished, by flogging, imprisonment, or being sent to a road gang. There was always plenty of work to be done on the main road, making or repairing it, or building bridges, culverts and drains.”

Bushrangers and isolation were not the only problems. Drought, frost, fire, liver fluke, sheep scab, ticks, Codling moth, and

gorse, all made living off the land difficult in the forging of the southern midlands and its identity. But rabbits were by far the worst. Although they had their uses: "Rabbits helped some people. The skins brought good prices, and many families earned much of their income from skins. In 1871 Tasmania exported 650,000 rabbit skins. Rabbits also provided meat, and rabbit shooting was a popular sport – when the Governor Sir Frederick Weld visited Oatlands in 1879, he was taken rabbit shooting."

I mentioned the thoroughness of the research. This book covers all aspects of the history of the area – social, political, economic, and military. Consider this for example: "In 1916 and 1917 referendums were held as to whether Australia should introduce conscription. Those in favour wanted more troops; those against disapproved of war. Brighton voted Yes, Green Ponds was about equal, but Richmond and Oatlands voted No, probably due to fears of a labour shortage, and in the second referendum the No vote was even stronger."

This reference prompts me to make mention of the increased role played by women during the First World War. Of course, we today have no comprehension of how strictly observed were the tasks reserved for men. So imagine that, but for the war, how eyebrows would have been raised at the sight of lady assistants working in Buttons Bros, not to mention Ina Gravelly becoming the station mistress at Oatlands!

The consequences of war were inevitable – I am sure that many of you have had family stories passed down of the well-intended but failed soldier settlement scheme after World War One, when returning soldiers were given blocks of land but in most cases simply did not know how to farm.

And the Depression of the 1930s struck hard in these parts. But here is a story that I think typifies the almost family-like spirit of you people – and it's also one of many instances of oral history in this book, by which I mean first person recollections as told to the author. Listen to these:

“Doreen Howard recalled that if people were in special need, Council would provide a few days’ work putting in a culvert or doing a bit of roadwork. She said, ‘If Mum wanted to get winter clothes, Dad wrote to the Council.’”

And: “Col Bevan said, “You’d give someone a day’s work and they’d give you a day’s work. If they had a good crop of potatoes and you had none, they’d give you enough to see you through.’”

And Emily McKay and her sister used to see, “These poor old chaps coming up the street with the sole off their shoes, a bag on their backs. Some of them would come in. Mum would always give them

bread and jam and a cup of tea, and perhaps they would ask if there were any odd jobs sharpening knives or cutting a bit of wood.”

Those harsh and distant times may seem inconsequential to your lives today, but of course they are not, for it was your people who made this beautiful part of the world what it is today, and this book has now become the repository of those times, recounted with many wonderful photographs and laid out in stunningly attractive graphic design by Julie Hawkins of In Graphic Detail, Hobart.

In conclusion I think it is fitting that, having begun my words with reference to the author Alison Alexander, I conclude them with reference to another individual who has played a major role in the story of the Southern Midlands - I refer of course to your longtime mayor Tony Bisdee (and I can tell you there is no shortage of Bidees in the index!) In his Introduction to the book Tony writes:

“As inaugural Mayor, and a Councillor since 1993 of the Southern Midlands and prior to that, Warden for eight years and Councillor of the former Green Ponds Municipality for twenty-one years until amalgamation, I have been privileged to meet and converse with the many residents of the southern midlands who can proudly trace their ancestry back to the very early 1800s. I saw the necessity to document their inspiring stories and family histories along with the development of the southern midlands region. I very much applaud

their vast contribution to our rich history and their continuing contribution to this beautiful and tranquil island state of Tasmania.”

So congratulations are in order to Tony and Alison and to everyone involved with this beautiful book, “The Southern Midlands: a History”, which I now officially launch.