

One Hundred Years on the Land

**The History of the Agricultural
Bureau of South Australia**

Caroline Guerin

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When man first began to supplement his diet of hunted game with cultivated crops, he became a farmer, and started the longest uninterrupted gamble in history.

– Archie Gray, Member of Wolseley Branch of the Bureau of Agriculture of South Australia, at a meeting held on 7 September, 1959.

Introduction

A history of the Agricultural Bureau of South Australia is necessarily a history of agriculture in South Australia, so closely have the two been intertwined over the past 100 years. To understand the success of this organisation we must first set the scene of its inception. There had been several forerunners to the Agriculture Bureau, clearly demonstrating the need for some sort of educational society or association if farmers were to learn how to succeed in this harsh land. Unfortunately, these early attempts to establish agricultural societies lacked the commitment necessary to maintain the members' interest.

Settlers had been able to buy land here from 1835, but could only take it up from 1838 onwards. They were attracted to the hills ranging from the Fleurieu Peninsula through the Mount Lofty Ranges to the Barossa Valley, extending to the Flinders Ranges in the north. The country between Mount Gambier and Naracoorte was also considered to be very suitable for farming, though the useful areas were limited by the poor natural drainage of the district. The land was surveyed in "hundreds", units of approximately 100 square miles, and divided into 80 acre blocks. Settlement gradually spread over the Mid-North, Yorke Peninsula and Eyre Peninsula.

Mr G. E. Wakefield developed a plan for the systematic colonisation of South Australia. The land was to be sold at a "sufficient price" to ensure that enough revenue would be generated to assist the emigration of new settlers. It was to be sold at auction and buyers needed to have ready cash for immediate payment. The Strangways Act of 1869 altered this, and land could then be bought on credit (though only in restricted areas, namely, those just inside the "safe" agricultural demarcation of Goyder's Line).

[I am indebted to Michael Williams, *The Changing Rural Landscape of South Australia* (Heinemann Educational Australia; Richmond, 1977), for the preceding paragraphs.]

On 6 November 1838, the South Australian Bush Club was formed. This group met

for the purpose of promoting the interests of and giving facility to those gentlemen who may be desirous of embarking on pastoral or agricultural pursuits, as well as to form a friendly compact between those individuals, for the mutual protection, preservation and restoration of each other's property. (*The Southern Australian*, 1 December 1838, p. 2.)

Unfortunately, it was not very long-lived, and had disbanded by August 1843. A Botanical and Horticultural Society of South Australia met in 1839, but there were no further developments from this group. The same year the Agricultural Society of South Australia was formed for the purpose of holding annual shows of stock and produce. By awarding prizes for the best exhibits, it was intended to "excite rivalry amongst those interested, and be the means of doing vast good to the colony". (*The Southern Australian*, 9 January 1839.) It held only one exhibition and this was in February 1841.

Then on 12 October 1839 another group, also to be called the Agricultural Society of South Australia, met. This one was to be modelled on the Highland Society of Scotland, and was formed "for the encouragement and advancement of Agricultural and Pastoral Knowledge", (*South Australian Register*, 12 October 1839, p. 5.) Their first President was David McLaren, Esq and members were to pay a subscription fee of two guineas per year. Its first year of existence was not very active, and a meeting was called to discuss its resurrection. On 11 December 1840 *The*

Southern Australian newspaper reported a successful dinner and meeting of the reformed Agricultural Society. Ninety to one hundred people attended. Mr McLaren, now the Chairman, spoke of the importance of agriculture and horticulture in the colony. He pointed out that 30 bushels/acre had been harvested from crops grown on the Adelaide Plains, and at least three shiploads of wool (2000-3000 bales) had been exported to England that year. Mr Williams of the Hermitage spoke at length, reminding settlers that

They had come from a distant country to one, the climate and atmosphere of which was in all respects so dissimilar, that they could hardly be expected as yet either to know the proper seed time, or the best method of putting the seed in the ground; but with all these disadvantages staring them in the face, the samples, both of grain and vegetables, which had that day been exhibited, were of such a quality as to warrant them in anticipating very different, and much greater results, when the capabilities of the country were more fully developed. Last year, he had raised upon his farm at the Para, potatoes weighing a pound each. Lucerne had been found to succeed admirably. The produce of their dairies had been such as to absolutely glut the market. The cheese produced in South Australia was excellent in its quality, and was likely ultimately to become a considerable article of export. The vine would no doubt be cultivated with success, and all that was wanting to render this colony prosperous and happy, was an ordinary share of diligence and perseverance, on the part of the colonists themselves. (*Southern Australian*, 11 December 1840, p. 669.)

Captain Sturt noted that the high price of labour in the new colony favoured the pastoralists over the agriculturalists. His brother, Mr Evelyn Sturt, predicted a future for South Australia in wool.

No country in the world was better adapted for sheep-farming than South Australia, as was proved from the fact of the sheep being so free from disease, and in so healthy a condition, a thing which could not be affirmed with truth respecting either of the neighbouring colonies. The staple export of South Australia would undoubtedly be wool. (*Southern Australian*, 10 May 1844)

Various attempts were made to start organisations relating to agricultural education. A Vine Association was established in December 1840

for the purpose of introducing extensively the vine, and other fruit trees into the colony. £100

were subscribed by the Government, and £170 by the colonists. £200 were sent to the Cape; remittances were also sent to Calcutta and to Sydney and the fruit trees when received were divided among the subscribers. (*South Australian Register*, 29 January 1842, p. 3.)

By the beginning of 1842, the Agricultural Society, which had looked so promising in 1840, was defunct. A meeting was called to revive it, this time with the addition of a horticultural element. The aim was to create a permanent institution to run an annual show. On Monday, 24 January 1842, the Mayor stated that

the hope has been confidently felt, that from this meeting will arise an enlightened society, combining the best principle and theory, with the soundest practical effects, all directed to the progressive encouragement of agriculture and horticulture in their various branches. (*South Australian Register*, 29 January 1842, p. 4.)

It had been a good harvest that year and the settlers were full of enthusiasm for their new colony. Captain Sturt was elected chairman of the new society. It was to meet at least once a quarter, and a 10 shilling subscription fee was paid by members. Mr Henry Watson, the secretary of the newly formed South Australian Agricultural and Horticultural Society claimed that:

A leading object of this society should be the collection of information relative to the agricultural statistics of the colony, and the experience of the settlers as to the most judicious modes of culture, and the diffusion of this information by the periodical publication of its transactions, which, it is to be hoped, would essentially conduce to the prosperity of Australian Horticulture and Agriculture. (*South Australian Register*, 29 January 1842, p.4.)

The South Australian Agricultural and Horticultural Society held its first exhibition in the school rooms on North Terrace opposite Government House. A special prize was offered for skinless barley. Representatives from Encounter Bay, Onkaparinga, Mount Barker, Gawler, Lyndoch Valley, Flaxman Valley, Morphett Vale, Angas and Yankalilla attended the Show. A dinner was held in the evening, and the speeches covered a variety of topics, including bushfires, smut in wheat and the possibility of controlling smut with copper sulphate.

The Scottish settlers formed the South Australian Ploughing Match Society in August 1843 with a Mr Auld as Secretary. Shortly after, the name was changed to the South Australian Agricultural

Society, as its activities were to include "a show of cattle, and of the produce of the soil, and the distribution of prizes". (*Southern Australian*, 29 August 1843, p. 2.) The first ploughing match was held on 1 September opposite the Market at Thebarton.

The Mount Barker Agricultural Association was established on 2 November 1846 with Mr W. Duffield as chairman and Mr W. B. Dawes as Honorary Secretary. It was a lively organisation in the beginning, but by 6 November 1849 a journalist for *The South Australian* was asking, "What has become of the Mount Barker Agricultural Association, with its debates, its monthly meeting, and its memorials that used to rattle through the district like cannon balls?" (p.4.) It too had degenerated into an organisation putting on shows and exhibitions rather than an educational institution.

Other groups were formed in rural areas to stage shows and ploughing matches. The Gumeracha Farmers' Society held annual ploughing matches until at least 1900. However, there still remained a need for some purely educational organisation.

A monthly paper called *The Farm and Garden* was first published on 8 July 1858 under the auspices of the South Australian Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Selling at 6d per copy, it had first been suggested by Mr Daniel Ferguson at the April committee meeting of the South Australian Agricultural and Horticultural Society the previous year. Its editor, Mr E. W. Andrews, set out the paper's purpose in the first edition.

The *Farm and Garden* will contain nothing bearing upon matters foreign to its title. Religious and political discussions will be excluded, except so far as the latter may bear directly and positively upon those interests which it is the especial object of the journal to promote and advance. Its success will depend upon those for whose immediate advantage it is designed. If they supply it with that fresh and consistent information which their experience enables them to do, they will assist each other as well as the journal, and the *Farm and Garden* will flourish in more senses than one.

It was to be a forum for "original papers from the practical farmers and gardeners of South Australia". A good idea, but circumstances conspired against it, and the last issue appeared on 18 June 1863.

A meeting was called on 29 October 1858 to establish a Farmers' Club. Chaired by Mr Daniel Ferguson, it was held at the Norfolk Arms Hotel in

Rundle Street. It was to be based on the regulations of English clubs and adapted to the colonial situation. A Central Club was to be formed with the intention of creating local branches in country areas. Members were to read a paper each meeting "upon a subject suitable to the time of year, with a view to its being freely discussed". (*Farm and Garden*, 1:5, p. 84.) The opening lecture of the Farmers' Club was delivered by Mr Alfred Wilson on 10 December 1858. His subject was *The Colonial Farmer: his past experience, present position, and hope for the future*. Mr Wilson was elected the Club's first president for a one year term on 17 November 1858. Sixty to seventy members were present at that time, but by May 1862 the numbers were seriously declining, and the club was last mentioned in November 1862.

In 1875 a young printer decided South Australia needed some sort of an agricultural journal, and resuscitated the old *Farm and Garden*. He gave it a new title, *The Garden and Field*, and issued the first number on 10 August 1875. This young printer was Albert Molineux who was to become a driving force in the advances of South Australian agriculture over the next 30 years.

During his evidence before the Select Committee on Vegetable Products, Molineux put forward his scheme for an Agricultural Bureau.

Agriculture (including horticultural and pastoral pursuits etc.) is especially worthy of fostering care in South Australia – a steady and consistent encouragement. It is worthy of a department specially devoted to its development, and therefore I suggest that a Bureau for Agriculture should be established. There should be a paid secretary who should be selected for his especial knowledge of matters pertaining to rural industries generally. He should be active, zealous, and anxious to promote the progressive development of agriculture. He would need the assistance of a clerk or two, who also would have to be paid.

There should be a Council, say of ten members, including the Professor of Agriculture, the Conservator of Forests, the Inspector of Stock and Brands, the Conservator of Water, the Inspector of Vineyards (and Hon. Entomologist and Fungiologist), President of the Royal Agricultural Society, Director of Botanic Garden, and others to be elected by the farmers and other cultivators, &c., who should elect their own president. No member of the Council should receive payment for his services – the honour would be quite sufficient reward.

In each hundred, where necessary, there should be a District Board for Agriculture, say also of ten members, selected on account of their superior intelligence and progressiveness. Two organisers might in the first instance be nominated by the council and the rest could be elected by the agriculturists, &c. (Report of the Select Committee on Vegetable Products, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, 1887, vol. 3, paper 90, p. 50.)

Mr Homburg sent the following report to the Commissioner of Crown Lands in January 1888.

Your Committee are hopeful that at no distant date Mr Albert Molineux's suggestions with regard to an Agricultural bureau may be carried out.

The Members of the Committee feeling that the time is opportunate [sic] for bringing this recommendation under your special notice requested me prior thereto to interview Mr Schomburg, Mr J. E. Brown, Mr F. Krichauff, Sir Samuel Davenport and Mr Molineux all of whom have expressed their approval of the establishment of such a bureau and have assented to undertake the "honorary" duties of Members thereof

of which Professor Lowrie should also be a Member.

The duties of such Bureau would in the opinion of the Members of the Select Committee be to foster and disseminate information concerning the growth of our agricultural and horticultural products in all portions of our colonies having due regard to climate and rainfall. The taking of careful statistics relating thereto and to the trade and commerce of our Products. Modern inventions-Practical and Scientific cultivation to assist existing and affiliated Institutions - And generally to limit and extend their duties as may in the opinion of the Government for the time being be deemed expedient.

R. Homburg

The Hon. the Commissioner of Crown Lands

A submission was made to the Government for the establishment of an Agricultural Bureau of South Australia with the Central Bureau (based in Adelaide) as its governing body. The suggestion was adopted and on 10 April 1888 it was reported that "The Board met today for the first time and read these minutes".