
The 1940 discovery in a disused flour mill on the outskirts of Hobart of the entire archive of the local Derwent Bank, from its founding in 1828 until its closure and liquidation, 1849–54, would thrill anyone with a historical bent, then or since. Archivists, on the other hand, might gasp at the somewhat chancy handling of the collection before what remained finally reached safe haven in the University of Tasmania archives. But at least it escaped the recycled paper drive of wartime Australia that induced the indiscriminate culling of some records, official as well as private. Eleanor Robin writes about the archive’s discovery and subsequent mining by historians and others in an absorbing introduction to this biography, which seeks to reinstate Charles Swanston (1789–1850) in Australian historical memory.¹

The book serves as a reminder for modern readers of what is now a distant period in the continent’s history, embracing inaugural European contact, European convicts and the ensuing personal and culture clashes; an era when global ocean trade had a dominant role in world politics, and when a British military career not uncommonly culminated in a colonial administrative post, with a retirement pension expected to be boosted by a land grant and/or business dealing. Charles Swanston epitomised those who served with that unique arm of colonial military and civil management, investment and trade, the Honourable East India Company, even as its influence was starting to erode in the early nineteenth century. The Anglo-Indian impact on Swanston’s life, and inherited/acquired fortune, was generations long, notably through his mother Rebecca (née Lambert). It was confirmed through his marriage in 1821 to 17-year-old Georgiana Sherson, daughter of a prominent civil servant in Madras (now Chennai), which was the home base of the Madras Native Infantry, the Indian army unit that he joined as a 15-year-old cadet in 1804. Aged 40 in 1829 having attained captaincy rank with further promotion unlikely, he began considering retirement and establishing a secure future for his growing family. The choice of Van Diemen’s Land, a British penal colony for close on three decades but with stirrings of transition to ‘free’ status, was carefully calculated over

more than two years. It was not a singular choice. Robin identifies at least a dozen others with an Indian background who were prominent in Van Diemen’s Land society at the time (pp. 24–25).

Considerable space is devoted to Swanston’s public life in the colony, since that is the author’s rationale for endowing him with the titular label of ‘statesman’. Her arguments and analysis are not always clear or convincing. Indeed the reader is on occasions left a little confused, by slips in chronology for example (p. 87) or by ‘slicing’ Swanston’s role into his family, social, leisured and ‘scientific’ pursuits, such as horticulture, his business pursuits and his role as a Legislative Councillor. Robin’s own confusion and/or misunderstanding about the nature of government during the period is most apparent in Chapter 7, ‘Civil Unrest’. She frames the governor’s role as being an advocate for the settlers with the British Government, while at the same time tacking on the modern concept of governor as ‘titular representative of the monarch’. Using the modern designator MLC for Council members is similarly mistaken, as is suggesting that Council members were ‘legislators’. In reality the governor, or more accurately the lieutenant-governor of the day was charged with full local administration of the colony, while ultimate authority and funding arrangements remained with the Colonial Office in London. The Legislative Council was established to assist in the administration, none of its members being ‘representative’ in the modern sense or able to introduce legislation except in minor matters of local imposts and charges.

Swanston served between 1831 and 1848 as a nominated or ‘non-official’ councillor, distinguished from the official or paid post-holders who comprised the inner Executive Council, during the terms of four lieutenant-governors – Sir George Arthur, Sir John Franklin, Sir John Eardley-Wilmot and Sir William Denison. They were men of widely varying personality, ability and experience chosen by a succession of British governments, and had to deal with changing concepts of the penal system, its costs and benefits, as well as the rising colonial demand for self-government. New settlements in 1834–35 at Adelaide and what became the Port Phillip District exacerbated those demands, skewing the local economy of Van Diemen’s Land even before the economic trade crisis of the early 1840s that emanated from mercantile London. This reviewer found a way through the confusion about the ‘civil unrest’ in which Swanston participated, as well as its eventual resolution in the 1850s, by turning to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries for the four governors.\(^2\) That is a not always acknowledged benefit of group biography projects, such as national dictionaries.

None of the Van Diemen’s Land agitators, the so-called ‘Patriotic Six’, displayed the disinterested statesmanship that Robin would claim for Swanston. A note to her introduction defines ‘merchant statesman’ as a ‘concept of the British Empire denoting an enterprising man who had at heart the benefit of the state’. Chapter 8 with the same title has much to say about enterprising merchant activity by Swanston and others, but virtually nothing about statesmanship. Moreover, the chapter’s opening quote from *Hunt’s Merchants Magazine* that begins ‘The great merchant should be half a statesman …’ is merely an extract from an American publication outlining the qualities required to ‘ennoble’ the merchant business to the level of a profession. Public good or the benefit of the state is only referenced indirectly.³

Firmer ground is offered for the merchant label, mostly derived from Swanston’s role in the Derwent Bank. Much of Robin’s cited evidence comes from six letterbooks in the bank’s archive, three of which concern bank matters and three, personal business and local politics, although all topics were inevitably intertwined. From 1831 Swanston was a major shareholder in the bank while also holding the post of general manager. The innovation of that appointment and the bank’s pioneering role as a mortgage or property bank was early recognised by economist and historian Syd Butlin, whose distinguished career later culminated at The Australian National University (p. 2),⁴ although ultimately such innovation was of minimal significance in the development of the Australian financial sector.⁵ The bank was in financial collapse by 1848, as was Swanston’s personal fortune and reputation as a merchant.

In its heyday with Swanston at its head, the Derwent Bank was the main financier of the Port Phillip Association (PPA), which fostered John Batman’s excursion across Bass Strait from Van Diemen’s Land in 1835 that included his ‘treaty’ with ‘Aboriginal chiefs’ of the Kulin nation. Swanston had also secured former marine officer, Calcutta merchant and Edinburgh ‘nabob’ George Mercer as a bank client and investor, so he too was an original (absentee) partner in the association. However, the Mercer family’s long impact on what became Victoria’s pastoral Western District was mostly channelled, along with fellow Scottish investors, through the Clyde Company started in 1836.⁶

Robin places great store on the naming of one of the main streets in Melbourne’s original grid for Swanston, despite there being minimal communal memory of who the man was. The name was bestowed by New South Wales Governor Sir

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Richard Bourke, resulting from his visit in February–March 1837 and the official designation of Melbourne as its hub, its port at Williamstown, with directions for surveying both towns in preparation for land sales. At the time of the visit, Bourke had just sent in his resignation, so this was seemingly one of the last times he could exercise his naming prerogative on official maps of the colony. Reasons behind some Melbourne street names remain speculative, but Elizabeth was surely named for Bourke’s beloved wife who had died shortly after their arrival in Sydney rather than for famed Queen Bess. Russell and Stephen (Exhibition Street’s name until 1880) referenced officials in Lord Melbourne’s Whig governments with whom Bourke would have had most contact, but they were also prominent sponsors of Britain’s Reform Acts 1832–37 initiating extension of the franchise, a principle with which he strongly aligned. That makes it all the more likely that Spring Street honoured the liberal Anglo-Irish politician Thomas Spring Rice whose estate was in Limerick, Bourke’s home county.  

As Robin details in Chapter 11, ‘The Port Phillip Pie’, the political presence of Charles Swanston was well in evidence in the colonies and at Westminster during 1837 and for at least two years of the succeeding Gipps administration. His standing mostly arose from the large investment for which PPA members claimed and received recompense. Swanston argued the case longest among a rapidly diminishing number of association members. Bourke was well aware of this and of the association’s early influence with the flood of other Port Phillip settlers, so naming a street for its leader may have been a judicious placatory move.

Robin finds it strange that while there were brief newspapers reports of Swanston’s death in 1850, possibly by suicide from a ship returning to Australia from California, there was no obituary. Not recognising the full eclipse of his local reputation, she ascribes the omission to cultural sensitivity about ‘naming’ suicide and to the fact that only Swanston’s eldest son, Charles Lambert, remained in Australia for any substantial period after 1850. She does not reference newspaper notices about the marriage of a daughter in January 1857 and his widow’s death at Marylebone, London, in February 1867, which mention only the Madras Army association of the ‘late Captain Charles Swanston’, and not his Van Diemen’s Land experience. Perhaps the family considered the latter was best forgotten, undermining post hoc attempts to reinstate his repute.


8 For Rebecca’s marriage, see Argus, 12 January 1857, 4; Courier (Hobart), 15 January, 2; South Australian Register, 16 January, 2; for Georgiana’s death, Argus, 17 April 1867, 4.
An inadvertent, if anachronistic, pleasure of the book is its wraparound cover using Henry Gritten’s lively watercolour of a view up Swanston Street from Princes Bridge in 1856. Regrettably, the painting’s perspective does not reach far enough north to where Swanston had bought half-acre blocks at Melbourne’s original land sales held on 1 June and 1 November 1837. He or his agent (since no evidence that he was ever at Port Phillip has come to light) paid £30 for the north-west corner of Swanston Street and a ‘back street’ that is now Little Collins, and £40 for the north-west corner of Swanston and Bourke streets. Seventy pounds was about a third of what John Batman paid for three corner blocks between Flinders and Collins streets. How long Swanston held title and whether he profited from their subdivision is probably unknowable, as is the significance of the purchase to his life or indeed to Melbourne. Notwithstanding the above reservations, the Robin biography provides openings for insight into several other aspects of the pre-gold era in the Australian colonies.

9 Historical Records of Victoria, Foundation Series, vol. 3, p. 85. Robin’s bibliography does not include the HRV series.