1. From Sheffield to Van Diemen’s Land

Edward Micklethwaite Curr was born into an upwardly mobile middle-class English-Catholic family, which rose to prominence in Sheffield in the late eighteenth century. Family sources speculate that the Currs might have come to England from Scotland in the seventeenth century with the Court of James I, but very little is known for certain.¹ The family’s rise in social status was principally due to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of John Curr, who was born in Durham in 1756. Edward M. Curr recorded that his grandfather trained as a civil engineer and, according to family reports, ‘was a man of considerable ability, self-reliant, original, and hard-headed’.² As a young man John Curr found employment in the collieries of Sheffield, a coal-rich town on the brink of industrial transformation. Curr’s abilities as a mining engineer were quickly recognised and in 1781 he was appointed ‘Superintendent of the Coal Works of his Grace the Duke of Norfolk’. His rapid rise was attributable to his talents as an engineer and inventor.³

In 1776 John Curr was one of the first engineers to utilise flanged iron rails in a colliery. The transportation of coal carts (‘corves’) along these rails was considerably more efficient than earlier methods. Curr also invented elaborate hauling machinery, which greatly increased the potential output of each pit. The people of Sheffield were initially suspicious of Curr’s improvements, reflecting their general resentment of the House of Norfolk’s tight control of the coal supply.⁴ Furthermore, when Curr introduced his iron rails, the innovation was strongly resisted by the colliery workers, who perhaps suspected improvement in efficiency would threaten their jobs. According to Edward M. Curr, his grandfather’s plan ‘created such a feeling amongst the colliery population, that they threatened to take his life, so that he hid himself in a wood for three days, until the ferment had somewhat subsided’.⁵

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² Edward M. Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), State Library of Victoria (SLV), La Trobe Library Manuscripts Collection, MS 8998.
⁴ Leader 1901: 84.
⁵ Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
Figure 2: John Curr’s rails and corves.

Despite considerable opposition John Curr’s technological improvements helped transform the British coal industry.\(^6\) He took out a patent on his haulage technique, which proved highly lucrative as other collieries adopted the ingenious system.\(^7\) At the height of his success, he published *The Coal Viewer and Engine Builder’s Practical Companion*, which is now recognised as a significant text in the history of mining and engineering.\(^8\) Despite his undoubted talents, John Curr was dismissed from his position as Superintendent of the Sheffield Collieries in 1801. During the early years of his management the mines’ profitability had increased exponentially, but in the 1790s this trend reversed due to an economic depression in Sheffield and increased competition from new and existing collieries inspired by Curr’s success. By 1801 the Sheffield collieries were working at a financial loss, prompting Curr’s dismissal after more than 20 years’ service.\(^9\) Curr continued to apply his talents to various projects. He was the proprietor of the ‘Queen’s Foundry’ in Duke Street, Sheffield, where he experimented with further improvements in mining technology. Between 1788 and 1813 he took out ten patents, most relating to the manufacture of rope and systems for its use in mines, on ships and for catching whales.\(^10\)

The success of the Duke Street business and the royalties from his various patents enabled him to keep his family very well. On 1 May 1781 at the Cathedral of St Peter, Sheffield, John Curr had married Hannah Wilson. The couple raised six daughters and three sons and resided at Bellevue House, Sheffield Park, to the south-east of the town. The premises were extensive, reflecting the wealth and social standing of the Currs in Sheffield.\(^11\) Clearly, John Curr can be credited with the rise in social status and financial security of the Curr family, which in turn laid the foundation for his descendants’ business and pastoral successes in the Australian colonies. Edward M. Curr later recorded that his grandfather might have bequeathed more money to his descendants were it not for the foolish actions of a naïve priest named Père Ductône. Shortly before his death, John Curr apparently entrusted 30,000 pounds to the priest, with instructions to invest the sum ‘in the French funds’. According to family legend, Ductône ‘took upon himself the responsibility of investing the whole sum in some mercantile bubble which he thought would be more profitable’. When the entire investment was lost in a shipwreck, the priest returned to face the late John Curr’s executors, offering only a silk pocket-handkerchief as recompense. The episode became folklore for the family of Edward M. Curr:

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\(^6\) The great value of John Curr’s innovations was affirmed in a report by consultant the John Buddle in 1787. See John Buddle, ‘Arundel Castle Manuscript’, quoted in Medlicott 1999: 67.
\(^7\) Medlicott 1999: 74.
\(^8\) See Curr, John 1970.
\(^9\) Medlicott 1999: 73.
\(^11\) Medlicott 1999: 77.
Years afterwards when I was a young man this handkerchief was in the possession of my mother, who said to me telling the story, ‘Eddie my boy, this handkerchief is all that your grandfather’s family got for thirty thousand pounds’. God willed it should be so!\textsuperscript{12}

John Curr had died in January 1823 and was buried in Sheffield at St Marie’s Church, which he had been instrumental in establishing.\textsuperscript{13} Edward M. Curr never met his grandfather, but described him as ‘a very exemplary and sterling Catholic’. He spent some time with his grandmother as a young boy: ‘She was an old lady, benevolent, strict and starch.’ He had very little to do with his six aunts, but his two uncles, John and Joseph, all figured more prominently in his life. Curr described his uncle John in the following terms: ‘Unlike the rest of the family, he was a little man but a good horse man, painted well and had studied engineering, in which science he was well read.’\textsuperscript{14} In about 1833 he migrated to Van Diemen’s Land and later to New South Wales, but according to Edward M. Curr he ‘married beneath him’ and became poor in the colonies. In the 1840s he travelled back to England to promote his theories on steam powered ocean navigation; although he published his views in 1847, his suggested techniques were not adopted by shipowners.\textsuperscript{15} Joseph Curr, like two of his sisters, chose a life in service of the church; he was a well-respected Catholic priest whom Edward M. Curr often saw during his education in England. Curr described his uncle as ‘a very exemplary man’.\textsuperscript{16} In 1829 Joseph had written a book on the sacraments and the duties of Catholics titled \textit{Familiar Instructions in the Faith and Morality of the Catholic Church}, which was published in at least three editions.\textsuperscript{17} He spent some time as a priest in his native Sheffield. In 1847 he moved to Leeds to minister to victims of a typhus epidemic and subsequently fell victim to the disease himself.\textsuperscript{18}

Edward Curr senior (the father of Edward M. Curr) was born at Bellevue House on 1 July 1798. He received a first class Catholic education in England and according to his son ‘was well up in the classics and a good mathematician’. To round out his education, he was placed in the service of a merchant’s office in Liverpool for two years. Due to the success and fortune of his father, Edward Curr senior did not lack opportunity: apart from his fine education, he was given ‘three or four thousand pounds … to begin the world with’ and ‘the choice of any business or profession which he might elect to follow’.\textsuperscript{19} A budding man of Empire, Curr formed the view that the colonies offered the best chance to

\textsuperscript{12} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.  
\textsuperscript{13} Hadfield 1889: 32.  
\textsuperscript{14} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.  
\textsuperscript{15} Curr, John 1847.  
\textsuperscript{16} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.  
\textsuperscript{17} Curr, Rev. Joseph 1829.  
\textsuperscript{19} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
1. From Sheffield to Van Diemen’s Land

develop his career and expand his fortune. In 1817 he sailed to Brazil, where he stayed for several months and learnt to speak Portuguese. Edward M. Curr recalled his father ‘made some long trips inland, and saw a good deal of the country’; he also met the celebrated naturalist Charles Waterton. Edward M. Curr’s sister Elizabeth recorded that Brazil made a lasting impression on her father: ‘[h]e often told me of the gorgeous flowers, the magnificent trees and the beautiful pacing horses’. Ultimately, Brazil did not sufficiently appeal to Curr. His son Edward later wrote ‘the state and customs of the country were not to his liking’, while his daughter Elizabeth was more specific: ‘the laws of the country pertaining to slavery were very distasteful to him’. Accordingly, Edward Curr senior returned to England to ponder where else he might venture.

In 1819 Edward Curr increased his fortune by marrying Elizabeth Micklethwaite, ‘with whom he received a considerable amount of money’. Elizabeth was a granddaughter of Richard Micklethwaite, the 4th Lord of Ardsley, whose family had resided for generations near Barnsley in Yorkshire. She was the posthumous child of Benjamin Micklethwaite, whom Edward M. Curr later described as ‘a dashing horseman, good shot, practical joker, and a rather hard drinking squire’. Benjamin had married Sarah Lister in 1795, but died in January 1798, four months before the birth of Elizabeth. Curr recalled that his mother ‘was noted in youth for a dignified and friendly manner, and great personal beauty’. She married Edward Curr senior at Bellevue House on 30 June 1819 in a Catholic ceremony, but the service was repeated in a Protestant church the following day to satisfy English law. His pockets filled with ‘three or four thousand pounds’ from his father and ‘a considerable amount of money’ from the family of his new wife, Edward Curr was ready to embark on his next colonial business venture.

**Hobart Town**

Soon after his marriage, Edward Curr entered into a business partnership with a London merchant, John Raine, who was about to sail for Van Diemen’s Land. Curr arrived in Hobart in February 1820 and purchased a home in Davey Street, which he named ‘Bellevue House’ after his father’s Sheffield residence. Curr subsequently found it difficult to dispose of his merchandise in Hobart and soon fell out with his business partner. Raine became insolvent in 1822 and Curr was only partially successful in recovering his debts. In the meantime, Curr visited Sydney and formed a new partnership with Horatio William Mason, an innkeeper

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20 Elizabeth Pennefather, ‘In the Early Days’, (1911), Murrumbogie Papers.
21 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
23 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
and merchant.\textsuperscript{24} He developed an advantageous association with the lieutenant governor of Van Diemen's Land, William Sorell, and was appointed to Sorell’s council in October 1820, when only 22 years of age.\textsuperscript{25} He also served in the Deputy Judge Advocate’s Court and on several committees of inquiry. Like his father in Sheffield, Curr became a leader in the Catholic community, hosting services in his store after the arrival of Father Philip Conolly in 1821. He was the treasurer of a fund to build a church and a home for Conolly in Harrington Street.\textsuperscript{26}

While in Hobart, Edward Curr senior showed the first outward signs of a proud, tough and uncompromising demeanour, which, although certainly a factor behind his many business and political achievements, had the tendency to alienate his fellow citizens. He brought several actions for repayment of money lent by him in ‘notes of hand’. He also appeared in court in July 1822 charged with assaulting his assigned servant, Frederick Davis, for failing to attend to his duties: ‘He had beaten Davis insensible with blows from an axe handle.’\textsuperscript{27}

Following his father’s death in Sheffield, Curr dissolved his partnership with Mason and returned to England. Evidently, John Curr had funds invested in his son’s activities, so his death might have released Edward from a familial obligations to remain in Hobart. Edward M. Curr later recorded that his father ‘had not found Van Diemen’s Land to his liking’ and was happy to leave with his young family in June 1823.\textsuperscript{28} While in Hobart, Elizabeth Curr had born two sons: Edward Micklethwaite was born on Christmas Day 1820 and William Talbot on 7 March 1822. A third son, Richard, was born off the coast of New Zealand on 22 June 1823 as the family was returning to England. Edward M. Curr later recalled how his brother Richard earned his nickname: ‘After a New Zealand Chief, well known to fame at the time, my little brother was long called Shungy.’\textsuperscript{29}

Edward Curr senior utilised the return journey well by writing \textit{An Account of the Colony of Van Diemen’s Land}, which was published in London in 1824.\textsuperscript{30} Curr’s book advocated the recreation of a model British society in the Antipodes, but pessimistically concluded that such an ideal was rarely achieved. He was not entirely dismissive of the colony’s potential, but rather suggested that it provided a challenging opening for the respectable English immigrant with capital to invest. Curr did admit, however, on presenting a copy of his book to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, in 1825, that ‘it gives what might be considered rather an unfavourable and discouraging account of the colony’.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Pike 1966: 269–272.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Von Stieglitz 1952: 17.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Robson 1983: 124.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Von Stieglitz 1952: 24.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Curr, Edward 1824.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Edward Curr to Lord Bathurst (Colonial Secretary), 31 March 1825, PRO, CO 280/1, Colonial Office: Tasmania, Original Correspondence.
\end{itemize}
Curr had ‘many tiffs’ with a rival author, George Daniel, who was preparing his own work on Van Diemen’s Land, but Curr confided in Daniel that he was very proud of his ‘little work’: ‘I send it like the Dove from the Ark and I wait anxiously to see if it returns with a green branch in its mouth.’ His hopes were soon realised.

## The Van Diemen’s Land Company

The influence of his book and the continuing patronage of Colonel Sorell ensured that Curr caught the eye of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, a newly formed agricultural company in London that hoped to obtain a large grant of land in the distant colony. According to Edward M. Curr the undertaking ‘was considered at the time to be the most important of anything of the sort, south of the equator’. Recently returned from Hobart, Colonel Sorell was a personal friend of at least one of the directors of the new company and was invited to advise the board on conditions in Van Diemen’s Land. Sorell enlisted the assistance of Curr, who met the board in December 1824. Curr subsequently became a significant shareholder in the new venture and was appointed Agent with an impressive salary of £800 a year. He was integrally involved in lobbying the British Government for the necessary land grant.

That Curr was appointed to this position at such a young age says much for his ability and for the quality of his business and political connections.

The growing Curr family returned to Van Diemen’s Land via Spain and Brazil, arriving in Hobart in March 1826. Curr senior quickly made his mark as a significant new power in the colony; he carried letters of introduction and despatches from Lord Bathurst, which he delivered to the lieutenant governor, George Arthur. As D.H. Pike later observed: ‘The company was powerfully backed, and with great caution Arthur invited Curr to join the Legislative Council.’ Curr recorded that he was ambivalent about the appointment and that his loyalties lay first and foremost with the Van Diemen’s Land Company, not Arthur’s council. K.R. Von Stieglitz, historian of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, has explained that Curr aligned himself with commercial interests in the colony: ‘He considered himself to be a link between the Hobart Town merchants and the Governor, as commercial men were not generally received at Government House.’

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33 See Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
34 See correspondence between Curr and the Colonial Office on 4 February 1825, 22 March 1825, 31 March 1825, 15 April 1825, 18 April 1825, 31 August 1825; PRO, CO 280/1, Colonial Office: Tasmania, Original Correspondence.
By September 1826 Curr had selected Circular Head (modern-day Stanley) as the company’s headquarters, but lobbied for the company’s grant of 250,000 acres to be made in separate blocks, rather than the one contiguous square that the charter stipulated. Arthur opposed this course bitterly and wrote to Lord Bathurst in November that ‘scarcely less than one fourth of the whole island’ would satisfy Curr.\textsuperscript{37} The company soon became the subject of considerable jealousy among the general populace. On 9 December 1826 the Colonial Times published a hostile report of both Curr and the company, to which Curr strongly objected; the newspaper was subsequently forced to print a reluctant apology.\textsuperscript{38} By 1840, when David Burn wrote an account of the company for The Colonial Magazine, the negative feelings regarding the company were well established:

The colonists entertained sanguine hopes that the large capital, said to be at this company’s disposal, would tend greatly ... to the general improvement of the island. Such, however, did not prove to be the case,—the company took their overgrown grant at Circular Head — became settlers upon an extensive scale — attempted no beneficial

\textsuperscript{37} Pike 1966: 269–272.
\textsuperscript{38} Von Stieglitz 1952: 18.
This resentment derived partly from the company’s extensive rights and privileges, but also from Edward Curr’s overbearing manner. One of Curr’s official roles was magistrate for the north of the colony, a position that gave him significant power and autonomy. Von Stieglitz has described the company’s land as a ‘colony within a colony, with Edward Curr as its Governor’. A critical *Hobart Town Almanack* once described him as ‘the Potentate of the North’ and disagreements between Curr and the administration in Hobart were frequent.

**Figure 4: Van Diemen’s Land.**

Map by Peter Johnson.

39 Burn 1973: 27.
40 Von Stieglitz 1952: 7.
41 Von Stieglitz 1952: 29.
Edward Curr reputedly became a very good judge of sheep during his time with the Van Diemen’s Land Company. He convinced the directors to spend over £40,000 introducing Saxony merino sheep to the colony. A newspaper later reported: ‘From these, the leading Australian flocks have drawn much of their blood.’ Curr must have passed his good judgement of stock to his son Edward M. Curr, who later became Chief Inspector of Sheep for the Victorian Government. The introduction of sheep was, however, extremely disruptive to the traditional Indigenous economy; consequently, the company’s poor relationship with Indigenous people was a prominent feature of its early years.

### The Cape Grim Massacre

Over a period of three months from late 1827, several employees of the Van Diemen’s Land Company were involved in a series of violent clashes with Aborigines culminating in the ‘Cape Grim Massacre’ in February 1828. The revisionist historian Keith Windschuttle has attempted to downplay the extent of violence at Cape Grim. In a well-researched response, however, Ian McFarlane successfully refuted Windschuttle’s claims, providing a shocking account of this troubled period. A key source of evidence is the journal of George Augustus Robinson, who recorded that sexually exploitative behaviour by the company’s men provoked a response in December 1827: ‘The aboriginal females said that the Company’s shepherds had got the native women into their hut and wanted to take liberties with them, that the men resented it and speared one man in the thigh.’ Shortly afterwards Aborigines speared some of the company’s sheep and threw them off a cliff. Employees then mounted an attack on the Cape Grim Aborigines from the company’s ship the Fanny, during which 12 Aborigines were killed. The ‘Cape Grim Massacre’ itself occurred in the remote north-west on 10 February 1828. Robinson’s key source was a convict, Charles Chamberlain, as he recorded in his journal in 1830:

> Interrogated a man of the name of Chamberlain, one of the four men who shot the natives. ‘How many natives do you suppose there was killed?’ – ‘Thirty’. ‘There appears to be some difference respecting the numbers’. – ‘Yes, it was so. We was afraid and thought at the time the Governor would hear of it and we should get into trouble, but thirty was about the number’. ‘What did you do with the bodies?’ – ‘We threw them down the rocks where they had thrown the sheep’. … ‘What had they

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done to you?’ – ‘They had some time before attacked us in a hut and had speared one man in the thigh. Several blacks was shot on that occasion. Subsequently thirty sheep had been driven over the rocks’.  

The fine details of the debate surrounding the massacre (including the number of Aborigines killed during the various encounters) are well canvassed by McFarlane, but it is worth considering further the role played by Edward Curr senior. The available evidence suggests that, although Curr was not personally involved in the violence and expressed written disapproval of at least one incident, the conflict had his tacit support. His written reports (to both his directors in London and to the authorities in Hobart) consistently downplayed the extent of violence and the culpability of the company. Furthermore, he clearly neglected his role as a magistrate by failing to investigate the Cape Grim Massacre and other incidents.

Curr’s inaccurate reporting of events was first evident in his account of the raid mounted from the company’s ship in early January 1828. Curr wrote to his directors on 14 January that the crew of the Fanny ‘were obliged to retreat without firing a shot’, thus concealing 12 Aboriginal deaths. In contrast, a disinterested visitor at Circular Head and guest of the Curr family, Rosalie Hare, wrote in her diary on 19 January 1828: ‘The Master of the Company’s cutter Fanny, assisted by four shepherds and his crew, surprised a party and killed twelve.’  

Regarding the Cape Grim Massacre itself, Curr never recorded casualties remotely approaching a figure of 30, but in fact revised his tally downwards from six to three when he belatedly reported the events to George Arthur in Hobart. As McFarlane has argued, any uncertainty regarding the number of Aborigines who died at Cape Grim can be blamed on Edward Curr’s negligence as a Justice of the Peace: ‘there was no trial, no investigation nor even a rudimentary investigation into the incident’. That an event as horrific as the Cape Grim Massacre could occur, yet remain unknown to the authorities in Hobart for nearly two years, is clear evidence that Curr was not fulfilling his duties. There seems only one plausible reason for his lack of action: he believed the violence against the Aborigines at Cape Grim constituted legitimate defence of company property, but lacked the confidence to test this theory by informing the lieutenant governor.

News of the Cape Grim Massacre eventually reached George Arthur in a letter from a senior company employee, Alexander Goldie, who was under pressure to explain his alleged role as an accessory to the murder of an Aboriginal woman.

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47 Quoted in McFarlane 2003: 280.
48 Lee 1927: 41.
50 McFarlane 2003: 281.
at Emu Bay on 21 August 1829. Goldie, who had responsibility for the alleged murderers, reported the incident to Curr in a letter dated 16 September 1829. Curr was outraged: ‘That the killing of this woman amounts to murder in the moral sense, I have no doubt whatever, and as little that you are a guilty accessory to the crime.’ Within two months Goldie wrote to Arthur in an attempt to justify his actions. He outlined the general state of violence, including the Cape Grim Massacre, and explained that Curr had never investigated any incident, even those preceding the declaration of martial law in November 1828. Goldie explained that many Aborigines had been shot by company servants and added: ‘On one occasion a good many were shot … and although Mr Curr knew it, yet he never that I am aware, took any notice of it although in the Commission of the Peace’. Goldie was taking the ‘Nuremberg’ defence to his indictable actions: he hoped to show that he (and the other men involved) were only ever acting in the best interests of their employer and had the tacit support of Curr until the events became public and the company needed a scapegoat.

As it was, Curr was still quite reluctant to investigate the murder at Emu Bay. He wrote to his directors: ‘it is apparent that I cannot escape the painful duty of investigating that occurrence myself as I sincerely hoped I might have done’. His inquiry was consequently very brief: he visited Emu Bay in December 1829 and took a statement from the storekeeper, Thomas Watson, but he did not interview any of the men actually involved in the murder. Ultimately, he concluded that the recent proclamation of martial law prevented him from charging the perpetrators with murder, a conclusion supported by the Solicitor-General. Nevertheless, the Emu Bay murder drew George Arthur’s attention to the wider issue of violence in Van Diemen’s Land Company territory. Curr’s subsequent correspondence with the Governor reveals his view that violence against Aborigines was justified when it involved protecting company property:

They have pilfered a little, it is true, but this I freely forgive, for it is probable they see no difference between us taking their kangaroos and their taking our flour and sugar. … I certainly will not sanction their being fired upon in retaliation for such an offence. If they attack our flocks again I should consider the case to be quite different. To steal what is of use to them may be consistent with notions of amity, and I think it is, but if they should commit a wholesale slaughter of our stock it can have no other motive than our expulsion and it will justify our taking strong measures in our defence.

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51 For details of the murder, see the journal of G.A. Robinson, 4 August 1830, in Plomley 1966: 192.
54 Lennox 1990.
56 Edward Curr to Governor Arthur, quoted in Lee 1927: 180.
While Edward Curr senior condemned certain acts of violence towards Aborigines, he justified others on the grounds of self-defence or the protection of company property. In a submission to the Aborigines Committee of 1830 in Hobart, he wrote: ‘The Crown sells us lands, and is therefore bound to make good our titles and possession against previous occupants and claimants.’\(^\text{57}\) In this way, Curr laid the blame for the ‘Aboriginal problem’ squarely at the feet of the British Government and asserted the primacy of the property rights of his company. As later chapters will show, these views were not dissimilar to those of his son, Edward M. Curr, who expressed regret at unnecessary acts of frontier violence, but ultimately saw conflict as an inevitable and justifiable consequence of colonial invasion.

### A Privileged Childhood

Edward M. Curr’s earliest recorded memory concerns his family’s voyage from England to Van Diemen’s Land, during which he visited Madeira and Rio de Janeiro: ‘None of my recollections of life are half so enchanting as those which refer to foreign countries in which I landed … in my early childhood.’\(^\text{58}\) Arriving in Hobart in March 1826, the Curr family first resided at Bellevue House, their former home in Davey Street, which they rented from its new owner. For nearly two years, while Edward Curr senior established his company’s headquarters at Circular Head, Elizabeth Curr remained in Hobart with her growing family. She was to bear 15 children: her nine sons were Edward, William, Richard, Charles, Walter, Arthur, Marmaduke, Julius and Montagu, while her daughters were Agnes, Augusta, Julia, Elizabeth, Florence and Geraldine.

In November 1827 the family sailed to Circular Head and moved into a small cottage known as Highfield House, which should not be confused with the later manor house of the same name. An early visitor of the Curr family was Rosalie Hare, the young wife of a ship’s captain, whose vessel delivered fresh supplies and new employees to the Van Diemen’s Land Company. Rosalie Hare was a guest of the Currs from January until March 1828 and recorded many details of her visit in her diary.\(^\text{59}\) She observed that many of her husband’s passengers were not enthusiastic about their new working conditions: their ‘fancy visions’ were dashed as they were greeted with ‘tents, bark huts and huge mountains’, rather than ‘comfortable houses as they had been used to see in England’. Hare’s description of Circular Head itself displays considerable ambivalence; the signs of civilisation the young woman could readily identify balanced its undeveloped and wild prospect:

\(^{57}\) Edward Curr, Submission to the Aborigines Committee, AOT CSO 1/323/7578, vol 8, p 374, quoted in McFarlane 2003: 290.

\(^{58}\) Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.

\(^{59}\) Lee 1927: 33–43.
Figure 5: Elizabeth Curr (c.1850).

Photograph courtesy of Ian G. Curr.
This was indeed a new scene! The Head justly called Circular presented a rather desolate sight ... Mr. Curr’s house, equal to a genteel English farm-house, stood on the top of a hill called Ladder Hill on account of a rude narrow path with here and there a few steps dug out of the earth leading to the house.

Near the house is a garden which supplies the settlers with vegetables – a fine piece of ground neatly laid out and very flourishing, vegetables every season ... Round the house are cornfields and we had the satisfaction of seeing the first harvest gathered in. There are also beautiful plains not far distant called Western, Eastern and Lovely Plains, where most of the sheep are kept in good pasture. The large number of snakes in the grass prevented my going to see them.

This part of the settlement is very woody, and I was much pleased with the beautiful little parrots and cockatoos constantly flying about; the kangaroos skipping on their hind legs are also very curious ... They are very fine stewed into what is here called a steamer. I had an opportunity of frequently tasting them. Mrs. Curr’s son had a small kangaroo, tamed in some measure, about the house.

Hare does not mention Edward M. Curr specifically apart from her brief reference to his pet kangaroo, but she later wrote: 'Many cheerful hours have I spent at Highfield House with my friend (Mrs. Curr): many pleasant rambles have we had together with the interesting little children.'

As has been noted, Hare recorded important details regarding company relations with Aborigines in this period. It is impossible to say what knowledge seven-year-old Edward had of these events; he might have been shielded from many details, but must surely have learned something of the conflict when he grew older. In her diary Hare also described visits to Highfield by Aboriginal women, one of whom warranted an entry of several lines:

She had learned a little English and appeared more intelligent than most of her race. She was astonished at all she saw, particularly at the chairs, tables and beds, never before having seen any other dwelling-house than a hut of the bark of trees made over a hole dug in the earth with a fire at the entrance. She insisted, much against my inclination and Mrs. Curr’s also, upon kissing us and the children.

Hare was also appalled to observe the result of cruelty to Aboriginal girls by sealers in the region: 'How was my very soul shocked when two of these girls took off their kangaroo-skin coats and showed the inhuman cuts these European monsters had given them.' She reported that Mrs Curr’s ‘feelings were instantly aroused’ for the youngest girl and that she had contemplated recruiting her
to take care of the children. According to Hare such a course was deemed too
dangerous, ‘as they have been frequently tried as servants, but universally
proved traitorous’.

Edward M. Curr himself recorded virtually no details of the two years he spent
at Circular Head. In 1829 he and two brothers, William and Richard, were sent to
England to commence their formal education. Curr later recalled the excitement
of the voyage, during which the ship was hit by a fierce storm and pursued by
pirates. In December 1829 the three Curr boys arrived at Stonyhurst College,
Lancashire. Their new school was a Jesuit institution that traced its origins to
the College of St Omer’s, which was founded in northern France in 1592. St Omer’s
was set up as one of the ‘seminaries beyond the seas’ during the anti-Catholic
Elizabethan period in England. Nearly two centuries later a tumultuous period
for Jesuit institutions saw the College driven north to modern-day Belgium. By
1794 Protestant fervour in England had waned, allowing the College to open
at its present site in Lancashire. A former pupil provided a neglected mansion
called ‘Stonyhurst’, where the College has been located ever since.

In the 1820s Stonyhurst housed up to 250 students and approximately 50
clergy. Curr and his brothers commenced their education at the preparatory
school ‘Hodder’, which was a short distance away from the main campus and
concentrated on the basics of spelling, reading, writing and grammar. Once they
were admitted to Stonyhurst College proper, the boys progressed through six
year-long classes, which were designated Abecedarians, Figuritians, Grammar,
Syntax, Poets and Rhetoricians. A College Prospectus from the period states
first and foremost that ‘the Scholars are instructed with great care in the duties
of religion and morality’. It also outlines the secular curriculum including ‘a
full course of Classical Education, … Reading and Elocution, Writing, English,
French, Arithmetic, and Geography’. The more advanced students received
tuition in ‘History, Algebra and Geometry … Logic, Natural Philosophy …
Chemistry, and the Higher Mathematics’.

Discipline at the College was firm: the children rose each day at 5.30am and
washed before chapel at 6am; the day was carefully divided between study,
instruction, meals and leisure time, before bed at 8.30pm. Holidays lasted for
only five weeks each summer and children were forbidden from leaving the
College at other times; the College even discouraged trips home during the
vacation period, as ‘such visits have been too often found to be followed by

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60 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
62 Gerard 1881.
63 ‘Stonyhurst College’, Monthly Magazine (1823); copy supplied by Mr David Knight, College Librarian
and Archivist.
64 ‘Stonyhurst College Prospectus’ c.1844, supplied by David Knight. Mr Knight stated that in almost all
respects the curriculum would have been the same in the 1830s.
idleness and discontent’. The gravest punishment at Stonyhurst was known as ‘a discipline’ and consisted of 25 lashes from ‘the cat’; it was apparently quite a rare occurrence and reserved for those on the verge of expulsion.

In addition to its academic curriculum, Stonyhurst fostered interest in the arts. The College reported in 1823: ‘Each Superior unites to his official and academic duties some pursuit of taste; painting, sculpture, electricity, astronomy, mechanics, botany, herbiculture, agriculture, etc.’ Furthermore, tuition in music, drawing and dancing was made available to those who wished. Edward M. Curr later recalled that his particular interest was literature, which he satisfied by ‘writing reviews of works and also novels, poems, sermons and so forth’. It was a privileged education for the Curr brothers, which cost their parents up to 50 guineas for each child per annum.

Edward, William and Richard spent eight years at Stonyhurst. Although they were very remote from their parents during this time, they were not altogether isolated from family. They had regular contact with their clerical uncle Joseph, who often visited Stonyhurst, and were contemporaries of their cousins John and Charles Curr (sons of their elder uncle John). Edward M. Curr also recalled vacation visits to his ageing grandmother Hannah Curr in Sheffield: ‘She kept a pretty good house in Sheffield … we used to amuse ourselves by ringing all the bells in the house, the old lady fancying she heard a noise, but unable to make out what it was’. Despite these antics Curr remembered his grandmother fondly: ‘The poor old lady was always very kind to me [and] took care not to flatter my vanity.’ In 1833 the boys’ parents briefly returned to England and took a house in Sheffield while Edward Curr senior reported to his company directors. Two more brothers, Charles and Walter, commenced schooling at Stonyhurst that year, while sisters Agnes and Augusta began their schooling at Preston, 14 miles away. The summer of 1833 was to be the last time Edward M. Curr saw his parents for over five years.

A Year in France

In August 1837 Edward, William and Richard Curr departed Stonyhurst and enrolled at St Edmunds College, Douai, in the north of France. The aim was

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65 ‘Stonyhurst College Prospectus’ c.1844.
66 Personal Communication, Mr David Knight, 6 November 2001.
68 ‘Stonyhurst College Prospectus’ c.1844.
69 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
70 The fees outlined in a College Prospectus for c.1844 were 40 guineas for boys under 12 and 50 for those over 12.
71 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
for the boys to become fluent in French and after nine months of study they boarded with a family in the village of Quincey for several more months. Their hosts were Monsieur and Madame Delhay, whose son Henri was of a similar age to Edward. Henri Delhay had recently begun studying to be a Notaire, in which profession Edward M. Curr believed he would succeed because he had the necessary ‘duplicity, tact and cunning’. Although Curr might have been glad of the company, he was not particularly enamoured of Henri: ‘He thinks that I am extremely attached to him, but it is not so. I know his interested duplicity better than he is aware of; if he deceives himself, let him do so.’

Curr recorded these and other thoughts in a journal, which he commenced in October 1838. The journal (only part of which survives) is both a record of daily events and a series of reflections on French literature, which he was reading as part of a seemingly independent course of study. The opening page of the journal sets a somewhat serious tone:

> When we consider the object of all the labours of man, we cannot but acknowledge, that if they are not all well directed, they all at least preserve that tendency which the Lord has chosen to give them. That tendency is to Happiness.

> When these pages are swelled to hundreds, let me again peruse them; that thus seeing the follies into which youth must certainly fall, I may correct the inclinations which are bad within me, and which have brought evil and may thus profit by the past. In a word may I thus learn to house the Supreme Being according to his heart, and conduct myself as he has ordered me to do with regard to my neighbour.

There is very little in Curr’s extant writings that reveal the impact of his religion on his life; this passage from his youthful journal is the principal exception. As well as alluding to his religious beliefs, Curr’s introduction to his journal displays an early commitment to a routine of reading, writing and reflection that would characterise his life. The journal contains observations on his daily reading, which included a French translation of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, Lady Morgan’s *The Life and Times of Salvator Rosa* and Florian’s translation of *Don Quixote*. The earnest tone of the introduction continues in parts, but is regularly broken by more light-hearted passages, including his observation that it is ‘droll’ that the comic *Don Quixote* was written by a man in prison:

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‘It has often been the case that men in mournful situations have produced comic works, and that men in the most flattering circumstances have written the most melancholy [sic].’

While studying the French language, Curr developed some patriotic views on the superiority of English poetry: ‘I do not … think that their verses in any respect equal ours. Though they may sometimes make a high sounding verse, we can … pour the very soul of melody into our strains’. He expanded this thesis five days later:

For if in life and liveliness the French are far our masters, if their conversation is more brilliant and their elasticity of spirit more unbroken; we at least can claim a language more adapted to melancholy subjects, and a way of thinking which is more sincere and affectionate. Our language too is more formed for describing grief as well as for comforting it. For if it is high and elegant; it is also warm and simple: and thus to comfort more effectual for ‘Honest plain words best pierce the ears of grief.’

Curr’s youthful journal reveals a fascination for language and a commitment to developing his abilities as a writer. On 14 November 1838 he reported that he had commenced writing his ‘Opinions, Recollections and Anecdotes of my friends at Stonyhurst’, which has unfortunately not survived. From time to time he broke his self-imposed study to practise fencing with students from St Edmunds and other suitable acquaintances. He later wrote in a family memoir ‘whilst in France we became excellent swordsmen’ and his journal seems to bear this out. On 24 October he ‘fenced “en salle” for the first time with a sub officer’. On 26 October he wrote: ‘I was interrupted in what I was writing yesterday evening by the arrival of the two Mons Guillards the elder of whom was come to fence with me. In the course of the evening shivered three foils.’ In his published recollections Curr later revealed that he had a childhood fascination with Napoleon and had read ‘perhaps fifty volumes’ on the French General. He explained that, when in France as a youth, he had practised his fencing with veterans of many of Napoleon’s campaigns.

It was clearly a stimulating time for a young man, but Curr was not immune to the effects of homesickness, which had been building for many years. On 5 November 1838 he wrote in his journal of his impatient desire to return to Van Diemen’s Land:

77 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
Oh with what anxiety do I not wait for that moment? When shall I jump on the ship’s deck which is to bear me away? Five years have already elapsed since I have seen my dear parents. Five years have run, heavily, most heavily on. But when I finally do arrive, all the pains of those years shall be instilled into one instant and changed into bliss, that instant shall be – when I fall on the neck of my mother.79

Curr’s journal has not survived intact beyond 15 November 1838, as unfortunately 40 pages are torn from the bound volume. It is possible that these pages contained observations from the remainder of his time in France, and perhaps from his subsequent sea voyage to Van Diemen’s Land. The next surviving page of the journal contains an undated entry consisting mainly of a quote from Milton. Intriguingly, the following pages include details of a droving trip Curr and his brothers undertook 18 years later in the Australian colonies. The potential that the lost pages might have contained records of Curr’s thoughts and experiences over an 18-year period rather depressingly presents itself. When or how the pages were lost remains a mystery.

Curr and his brothers left France in November 1838. They spent Christmas in England before departing for Van Diemen’s Land aboard the William Bryan. They arrived at Circular Head in May 1839 where Edward M. Curr would have observed the expansion of the Van Diemen’s Land Company’s settlement, including the construction of his family’s new 24-room manor house. He would also have observed the expansion of his own immediate family and met four new siblings – Elizabeth, Marmaduke, Julius and Montagu. Sadly, he could only pay his respects at the grave of his sister Julia, who had died in 1835 at the age of two after a tragic accident in the garden at Highfield.80

Edward M. Curr’s childhood was by any measure a remarkable one: he sailed four times between Britain and Van Diemen’s Land, experienced foreign countries and remote colonial outposts, completed a rigorous education in Britain and France, and developed a keen interest in reading and writing that would shape his life. His childhood was certainly one of privilege, but it was also one of diverse experiences that would open his eyes to a world of possibilities. His upbringing provided the perfect preparation for a varied and remarkable colonial career.

Figure 6: Highfield, Circular Head. William Purser.