In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* Edward M. Curr gives only a vague explanation for his leaving Victoria in February 1851, noting that he was ‘desirous of a change’ and wanted to travel through some of the countries ‘about which I had interested myself from boyhood’. There seems little doubt, however, that his father’s death three months earlier was a major catalyst in his decision; for a decade he had worked at the behest of his overbearing father, but was now free to pursue his own interests. Before he departed, arrangements were made regarding the runs he and his brothers had inherited. Richard Curr leased the southern squatting runs from his brothers and based himself at the Colbinabbin station. The northern runs (including Tongala) were let to a Mr Hodgson, although it appears that one or more of the younger Curr brothers might have assisted him with station management. Meanwhile, Edward, Charles and Walter departed the colony only a few months before the discovery of gold threw the pastoral industry into turmoil.

Curr’s younger sister Florence recorded in a memoir that Richard established a home for his mother and younger siblings at Colbinabbin. As the closest station to Melbourne, Colbinabbin had occasionally been a winter residence for the wider Curr family. Richard’s principal challenge was maintaining his labour force, as the station was only 40 miles from the Bendigo goldfields. Eleven-year-old Florence later recalled that she had a marvellous time at Colbinabbin, blissfully unaffected by ‘the troubles of Richard in finding and still more in keeping shepherds’. The labour shortage is the principal reason why Richard, in consultation with his mother, decided to sell the squatting runs in 1852. Perhaps Richard also yearned to join his elder brother overseas, which he soon did.

In his last will and testament, Edward Curr senior had bequeathed his pastoral leases and livestock to his sons and his city properties to his daughters. Although this might have seemed an equitable distribution in 1850, the subsequent discovery of gold had the dual effect of boosting the value of his daughters’ city properties, while rendering it extremely difficult for his sons to manage the squatting runs following the collapse of the labour market. This effect was compounded by Richard’s decision to sell the pastoral leases. In his private family memoir of 1877, Edward M. Curr observed that Richard’s decision to sell

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1 Curr 1883: 450.
2 See files for Colbinabbin, Corop, Moira and Tongala, PROV, VA 2878, VPRS 5920 Pastoral Run Files (microfiche). See also Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
4 Edward Curr’s Last Will and Testament, 14 April 1849, PROV, VPRS 7952/P1, Unit 3, Item A/375. See also Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
the runs had ‘ruined my father’s sons’. He neglected to describe the extenuating circumstances of Richard’s decision, simply recording that the stations were sold for £11,000 despite yielding £2,000 per annum. Richard sold the runs to James Murphy and William Looker. Murphy was a successful brewer and wine merchant in Melbourne who was elected to Victoria’s Legislative Council in 1853. In 1857 Murphy sold the southern stations to John Winter, whose wealth grew after the discovery of gold on his property near Ballarat. Winter’s son built a fine Italianate-style brick homestead at Colbinabbin in 1867, to which Curr refers briefly at two points in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*. It was men like Murphy and Winter that benefited most from the boom in Victoria that followed the gold rush, not Curr and his brothers who found themselves without property. Curr’s sense of economic loss was intensified by the ever-increasing value of his sisters’ city properties: ‘£30,000 was refused at one time for St Heliers, and £22,000 for a house in Collins St. nearly opposite the Bank of Australasia’.

Unsurprisingly, Curr did not reveal this financial misfortune in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*. He explained in the last pages of his book that upon his return to Victoria in 1854, ‘I found the squatters – who, during the first fifteen years of the colony, had established a great trade in wool, and built a thriving city – being denounced as monopolists of land and enemies to the public weal.’ That Curr himself was no longer a squatter, and that the wealth he did acquire in the 1840s was subsequently lost during a drought on the Lachlan River, is hidden from the reader. Ultimately, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* served to establish Curr’s identity as a Victorian pioneer and to assert the social status of a colonial gentleman, which (as a closer analysis reveals) he had later struggled to maintain.

All of this future misfortune was unknown to Edward M. Curr when he sailed for England in February 1851 aboard the *Stebonheath*, accompanied by his brothers Charles and Walter. In its voyage across the Pacific the *Stebonheath* ventured unusually far south, encountering strong winds and ‘great numbers of icebergs’; she visited Rio de Janeiro for supplies in early May before reaching Plymouth on 5 July. The ship carried a cargo of 500 casks of tallow, 3,038 bales of wool and 27 passengers, several of whom, according to *The Times*, had ‘realized handsome competencies in Port Phillip and do not intend returning’.

The Currs were not so fortunate, their paternal inheritance being somewhat more modest. Under the original terms of his father’s will, Edward M. Curr

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5 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
6 Curr 1883: 338.
7 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
9 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
10 *The Times* (London), 7 July 1851: 8.
received no share of the pastoral properties left to his seven surviving brothers; this reflected the fact that his father had already gifted him a flock of sheep in partnership with his late brother William, with which they had established their own pastoral station at Corop. Shortly before Edward Curr senior died, however, he altered his will to direct that his eldest son should receive half of the share intended for his youngest son Montague, then 12 years old. Curr senior might have intended that this share be held in trust until Monty reached a more mature age, but whatever the case Edward M. Curr was able to fund extensive travel by selling some of his own sheep and leasing the Corop run for three years at £320 per annum.

Curr arrived in London at the height of the ‘Great Exhibition’ in Hyde Park. It seems likely that he would have visited the Crystal Palace to marvel at the ‘Works of Industry of all Nations’, but his short family memoir makes no mention of such a visit, simply noting: ‘On arriving in London, I shook hands with my brothers and went to Cadiz, where I remained three months.’ Curr spent a further eight months in Seville, after which he had ‘learned to speak Spanish with tolerable facility’. Curr clearly hoped to satisfy his fascination for Spain and its history, which began during his schooling and continued through his ten years as a squatter.

At Stonyhurst College Curr had developed a boyhood fascination for the First Carlist War in Spain, fought between liberal royalist forces representing the young Isabella II and politically conservative forces representing her uncle Carlos. Curr’s teenage sympathy for the Carlist cause, despite British support for Isabella, probably derived from his Catholic and Jesuit loyalties. In claiming the throne, Carlos enjoyed the support of conservative elements of the church, which opposed the general liberalisation of Spanish politics in the period. Moreover, the stronghold of the Carlist forces was the Basque provinces of northern Spain, where Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola was born. Support for the Carlists was thus quite understandable for a student of a Jesuit school, but as Curr later explained, his enthusiasm also derived from the exploits of a famous wartime hero: ‘I had myself been possessed by a strong desire to take service … under Zumalacarregui, the great Carlist general.’

Curr’s interest in Spain survived beyond a boyish fascination in war and grew into a wide-ranging interest in the history and language of the country. It is significant that, despite having studied French and Italian ten years earlier, Curr chose to focus his new studies on the language and history of Spain. After almost a year’s study in Cádiz and Seville, Curr dispensed with his books and

11 Edward Curr’s Last Will and Testament, 14 April 1849, PROV, VPRS 7952/P1, Unit 3, Item A/375.
12 Curr 1883: 450; Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
13 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
set out on a circumnavigation of the Mediterranean, which lasted approximately eight months, beginning and ending at Seville. This was Curr’s own middle-class version of the ‘Grand Tour’, which had been a popular rite of passage among young and wealthy Europeans since the seventeenth century. Although Curr took in much of the traditional route, his itinerary also had a decidedly Eastern flavour.

Figure 12: Edward M. Curr’s Mediterranean tour.

Map by Peter Johnson.

He first visited the southern Spanish towns of Granada and Almeria. His experiences in Granada seem to have been a highlight and feature in an extended aside in Recollections of Squatting in Victoria. During the 1840s, Curr and his brothers had possessed an impressive ‘Bush Library’ featuring novels, poetry, histories and various other texts. The books were read, re-read and endlessly discussed by the brothers at Tongala. Curr noted: ‘Of the volumes in our collection, very favourite ones with me were those of Washington Irving, which treat of Moorish times in Spain.’

15 Curr 1883: 361.
16 Irving 1832.
its intricate history. He managed to locate Matteo Ximenes, Washington Irving’s guide of 20 years earlier, who showed Curr around Granada and shared his memories of Irving’s research in the city. Curr later recalled:

Altogether there was something very pleasant in going over in Andalusia the histories which had occupied our little circle on the Goulburn, as well as in looking back on past discussion and conjecture concerning localities from the vantage-ground of personal experience. Indeed, in re-reading history … on the ground where its scenes were enacted lies one of the great charms of travel.17

Curr found the pace of life in Andalusia pleasantly sedate, and later attributed this to a lack of exposure to the single-minded endeavour of British colonialism: ‘To me there was also something congenial in the every-day life of a community into which the disquietude, bustle, and hurry of the Anglo-Saxon world had not yet succeeded in forcing themselves.’18

From Granada Curr travelled to Almeria before leaving Spain by boat for Southern France in the early summer of 1852. His tour took him to many European cities including Marseilles, Lyons, Geneva, Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples. He travelled via steamer to Corfu and thence to the Greek port of Patras. He proceeded on horseback along the Gulf of Lepanto to Corinth and then Athens. After spending some time in the Greek capital, Curr travelled on to Constantinople and then Beirut.

For his travels through ‘the Lebanon’ Curr required the services of an interpreter, commonly known as a ‘dragoman’, who guided him to such places as Zahlé, Damascus and Tripoli. He later wrote that his guide proved to be inadequate: ‘Having had a misunderstanding with my dragoman … I discharged him on my return to Beyroot.’19 Confident that he could speak a little Arabic, Curr continued his journey alone, travelling south to Sidon, Tyre and Acra. For three weeks Curr stayed at the Franciscan pilgrims’ hostel the ‘Casa Nova’ in Jerusalem, from where he visited the Dead Sea, San Saba and Bethlehem. Completing his circumnavigation of the Mediterranean via Gaza, Cairo, Alexandria, Malta and Gibraltar, Curr returned to Seville at the end of 1852, before travelling via Madrid, Bayonne and Paris to London.

From early 1853 Curr spent a year in Dublin, Paris, Brussels and London. He left no record of how he spent his time, but it seems unlikely he did work of any kind. He presumably spent time with family in England, but he also turned his hand to creative writing. In May 1853 The Illustrated London News published Curr’s

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17 Curr 1883: 364.
18 Curr 1883: 364.
19 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
account of a bushfire he had earlier observed near Kilmore, north of Melbourne. It is one of his earliest surviving literary efforts and displays the flamboyantly verbose style that characterised his later work. It is worth reproducing a small sample:

Below us was a station; near the house was a barn and wool-shed, and many stacks of oats and wheat. The fire was creeping gradually and slowly towards them; a thread of fire – if I may use the expression – like a thing endued with life, like a brilliant serpent – was winding its way amongst the grass to the fated stacks and buildings. We at a distance at once saw that the struggles of the proprietor and several of his men to arrest the flames were utterly hopeless … They were as children on the shores of the sea who would fain bar back the tide. In vain they plied their green boughs, beating out for an instance the point of the flames most in advance. The luminous monster, as if forecasting a prey, noiselessly stole on…

In vain were struggles! in vain were hopes! but man will struggle: even death is met with less regret, doing. And the hardy Britons wrestled with their foe; but in every direction it overlapped them, and without a check kept on, and at every point they were beaten back. They did their duty well, and retired slowly, leaving nothing untried. And now the fence which enclosed the stack-yard was almost gained…

The fire had conquered: it leaped on its prey, it reared its gorgeous crest upon the stacks, a dense smoke arose, a mimic volcano spouted its flames, and in two minutes all was reduced to ashes. Without proffering useless condolence, we mounted our horses and pushed on.

The full extent of the conflagration described by Curr suggests it was almost certainly the ‘Black Thursday’ fire of 6 February 1851, which engulfed one quarter of Victoria and killed 1,000,000 sheep. If this is the case, the fire preceded Curr’s departure from Melbourne by only a few days; the finer detail of his account suggests he was riding from Tongala to Melbourne to board the ship and was lucky to negotiate the fire without incident. In 1853 Curr’s family back in Australia would likely have noted with pride the publication of his account of the fire. His sister Florence later recorded: ‘Mother used to subscribe to the Illustrated London News then the only pictorial paper and we used to receive them every month or two.’

Of all Curr’s travel destinations, Dublin was to have the most lasting effect on his future life. It is quite likely that one reason for Curr’s return to Europe in 1851 was the poor prospect of finding a wife in the colonies. If this were true, his quest was achieved in Dublin; on 31 January 1854 he married Margaret Vaughan at St Mary’s Church in Marlborough Street. Unlike his father, Curr did not receive ‘a considerable amount of money’ when he married. He later recalled the following details about his bride:

Miss Vaughan whom I met in Dublin was of a family long resident in Kildare, and her father having run through his paternal inheritance, obtained a situation in a mercantile house in Liverpool, in which city he and his wife died. In accordance with the idea of those times, he made a point of not engaging in business, as he might have done in Dublin as such a course would have been considered derogatory to the family dignity.²²

Following their wedding Edward and Margaret probably travelled to London to attend the marriage of Edward’s brother Richard to his French bride, Maria, on 14 February.²³ Both couples then made preparations to sail for the Australian colonies. It is possible that Curr always intended to return to the Antipodes to invest his inheritance in a profitable venture. It seems, however, that his experiences in London did nothing to dissuade him from such a course. He wrote two years later of the strong recognition accorded the Australian colonies in the London business community:

the windows of Oxford-street literally were as one mighty signboard, pointing with its hundred fingers towards the provinces of Australia and the ports of Tasmania … the Strand and Bombard-street were but warehouses and shipping offices for the Southern Seas, and London docks one great terminus whence the Emigrant, poor and rich, shaped their course for lands where energy and enterprise were received and rewarded.²⁴

Curr’s decision to end his holiday and pursue riches once again was certainly also influenced by his new status as a family man. With his brother Richard and their two wives, Curr sailed from Gravesend, Kent, aboard the *Chouringee* on 14 March and arrived in Melbourne on 30 June 1854.²⁵

The Curr brothers then set out to rectify Richard’s blunder of selling the family squatting runs by attempting to regain their position as men of property. They

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²² Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
²⁵ E.M.V. Curr, ‘Memoir’ (1872), Murrumbogie Papers.
certainly had reasonable capital behind them (Edward M. Curr’s charge that Richard’s early sale of their runs ‘ruined my father’s sons’ is an exaggeration) but they were ultimately frustrated by a series of mild successes and dismal failures in business over the following decade. Edward Curr senior’s sons inherited squatting runs that were sold in 1852 for £11,000; when divided between the eight surviving sons this is hardly a fortune, but neither is it an insignificant amount. Moreover, Edward M. Curr’s own station at Corop fetched £4,000 when sold in 1852.26

It is unclear whether Curr initially intended to invest his capital in Victoria. If he did, his resolve was soon broken by the transformation of the colony following the discovery of gold: ‘the old order of things’ had been ‘swept away’.27 While Curr had been away the population of Victoria had more than tripled from 77,000 in 1851 to 237,000 in 1854.28 Furthermore, the pastoral industry’s contribution to Victoria’s economic output had fallen from 28 per cent to seven per cent.29 Recalling his poor impression of the changes wrought by gold, Curr later recounted the oration of ‘a tall, burly, good-tempered looking Scotchman’ who held court to an audience of new arrivals and noticed Curr as he stepped off the wharf in 1854:

‘Here’s a man that doesn’t know me, but I know him. Three years back there were not three men in the colony who didn’t know his father – the father of separation, as we used to call him – or who wouldn’t have sworn to his pair of roan horses anywhere. Well now! I’ll give this gentleman a week to find a man who ever heard of his father, or of separation either. Why, these new chums, who have overrun the colony, seem to think, by George! that they are the first comers here, and that this wharf, and the houses and bridges we built, and the roads we made, and the stock we brought from other colonies before they ever heard of the place, grew of themselves like the gum trees.’30

The invective of the burly Scot punctuates Curr’s conclusion to *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, and gives us some idea as to why he left the colony so soon after returning with his new wife in 1854.

26 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
29 Dingle 1996: 16.
The ‘Waste Lands’ of New Zealand

Less than three weeks after arriving in Melbourne, Curr sailed to New Zealand to scout out a new life for his wider family. He returned after five weeks to collect his wife, with whom he travelled to Auckland in September 1854. Curr’s three eldest surviving brothers, Richard, Charles and Walter, joined him in New Zealand. All except Walter had married in 1854 and they travelled across the Tasman Sea with a clear desire to purchase freehold land. Although the Currs spent only a short time in New Zealand, Edward M. Curr’s time there was important because he wrote a series of letters to newspapers about land settlement, which clearly state his economic and philosophical justifications for the colonial project.

Prior to the Currs’ arrival in New Zealand, Governor George Grey had made significant changes to the land system, which appeared to offer considerable opportunities to those, like the Currs, who had some capital to invest. Most importantly, in March 1853 Grey had issued ‘cheap land’ regulations, which dropped the price of crown land from £1 per acre to five or ten shillings per acre. Grey believed that the higher price had discouraged the immigration of poorer settlers and his regulations were designed to address this issue; but his policy soon provoked fear in some quarters of an influx of Australian capitalists. The arrival of the Currs in 1854 is certainly evidence that men with capital were attracted by Grey’s reforms. By mid-November the Currs had sailed to Nelson, from where Edward and Richard visited Hawke’s Bay and the Ahuriri region (Napier). They expected that freehold land in this district would soon be sold for ten shillings an acre, following a government purchase of land from the Maori. Their plans were frustrated, however, by the reluctance of the local authorities to release the land for purchase.

Grey’s land regulations had been enacted shortly before the election of New Zealand’s first parliament under the 1852 constitution. A prominent member of the new legislature was Edward Gibbon Wakefield, whose influence on New Zealand colonisation had already been great. Even before his election to the House of Representatives in August 1853, Wakefield had opposed Grey’s new land regulations. As a prominent theorist on colonisation, Wakefield had previously argued that crown land should be sold at a ‘sufficient price’ to finance the growth of a colony. Wakefield’s theories had been criticised for...
setting this ‘sufficient price’ too high, but as a member of the new parliament (and a towering figure in New Zealand’s short settler history) his views held some sway.

Figure 13: New Zealand.

Map by Peter Johnson.

Despite his foiled ambitions to purchase cheap freehold land, Edward Curr remained in New Zealand for over a year; he made his time profitable by importing horses from Newcastle, New South Wales, including thoroughbred mares from the stables of George Wyndham.  He chartered a small ship called the Waterwitch and imported two cargoes of 100 mares each in March and October 1855. During the first voyage stormy weather resulted in the loss of 30 horses.

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and Curr lost £300 on the transaction. His luck improving, the second voyage was completed without the loss of any horses and Curr cleared £1,500. He later wrote about the eventful first voyage in one of his more entertaining literary efforts. While Curr was in New Zealand, his first son, Edward Micklethwaite Vaughan Curr, was born on 10 April 1855. Less than a year later, the Currs decided to abandon their plans for a new life in New Zealand and returned to Australia in January 1856.

During his last few weeks in New Zealand, Curr wrote a series of letters to the New Zealand Spectator and the Wellington Independent, which strongly criticised the reluctance of local authorities to release the five-shilling and ten-shilling lands for freehold purchase. These letters were published as a booklet under the title The Waste Lands of the Province of Wellington, New Zealand. The letters are among his earliest surviving writings and provide considerable insight into his views on the colonial project and, importantly, his economic justifications for his earlier squatting activities in the Port Phillip District. Unlike Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, these letters reveal Curr’s views during the actual period he was a pastoralist.

Curr’s New Zealand letters were motivated by frustration: he and his brothers had capital they wished to invest and could not understand the reluctance of the New Zealand Government to court this capital. Curr championed the role of the investor in nation building and mercilessly lampooned the apparently narrow-minded attempts of the New Zealand legislature to exclude Australian capitalists. He opened his first letter with an account of London in early 1853 (quoted above), which noted the great enthusiasm among emigrants and businesses alike for the Australian colonies. Describing the massive waves of migration in the early 1850s, Curr asked: ‘How is it that New Zealand received no part of that mighty Exodus?’ The answer, according to Curr, was that ‘the great advantages nature has provided here have been, and are, withheld from the public’. He argued that the Wellington district had enacted legislation which ‘pandered to confirm iniquitous security of Squatting tenure’ despite the fact that, unlike Australia, New Zealand was wholly unsuited to a system of pastoral leases.

One might, of course, propose a certain irony in the fact that Curr criticised New Zealand pastoral leaseholders for monopolising land, while simultaneously defending the squatters of Australia, whose ranks he had only recently departed. For Curr there was no inconsistency here: the very different geographical

37 Curr 1856. The original letters were published in the New Zealand Spectator on 28 November 1855, 22 December 1855, 16 and 30 January 1856; and in the Wellington Independent on 5 and 15 December 1855.
conditions in New Zealand required, he argued, a different approach. To demonstrate his point, Curr trumpeted the contribution of the squatters to Australian prosperity:

No body of men ever created so much wealth in so short a time. The squatter founded Melbourne whose history from first to last is unprecedented and unequalled in the annals of colonization. Had there been no squatter there would have been no Sydney. The overlanding squatter saved Adelaide from ruin and starvation. He has ministered largely to the Factories of England; and he has fed the thousands which England has sent forth to search for gold in his country at the Antipodes. 39

Prosperity brought to Australia by the squatters, argued Curr, had benefited the wider settler community; not least those (like his father) who had seen the value of their town allotments grow exponentially. Curr also believed that the Squatting Age in Australia was still in its infancy and that pastoral leases remained an effective land policy for the Australian colonies:

When New Zealand has all been traversed, sold, ploughed, where ploughing is possible, and mapped; when coasters have traced each bend of its shores, and the leadline found every shoal, – unexplored El Dorados will still be the dream of the Australian, and Rumour will whisper to Enterprise, and the spirit of Exploration still lead by the hand the unquiet, sun-burnt Squatter. 40

Curr contended that New Zealand required an alternative land system to suit its smaller size and distinctly different terrain. He asked what signs there were that New Zealand was benefiting from the economic stimulus of settler colonial endeavour: ‘Are we to look for them in your country without roads or bridges, your harbours destitute of shipping, your hills without flocks, or your plains without cultivation?’ He believed that the chief reason for New Zealand’s slow economic growth was the unsuitability of the pastoral lease system; the chance to acquire freehold land would, on the other hand, transform the colony. Furthermore, he argued, locking up the lands until they could fetch a higher price displayed flawed economic reasoning. In his third letter to the New Zealand Spectator Curr wrote:

I maintain that people immigrate to take possession of the soil – that England has avowed the right to it by placing the management of the land in the hands of the colonists themselves, and that the only justification of ANY price being put on the land – is, to provide with the

proceeds means by which the land may be made productive, as labour, roads, &c., and to prevent the monopoly of land by those who would possess themselves of more than they have capital to make use of — or the acquisition of it by proprietors whose capital so invested is too small to be conducive to public prosperity. This is plain speaking, and will be understood even by independent electors! and the intelligence of the country! fully as well as if clothed in the subtle phraseology of Adam Smith.41

The principal target of Curr’s impassioned treatise was the Wellington Provincial Council, which he blamed for locking up the ten-shilling lands he had hoped to purchase at Hawke’s Bay. Two members of the council earned a particular rebuke: Wakefield, who was also a member of the national parliament, and the Superintendent of the Wellington Province, Dr Isaac Featherstone.42 Regarding Wakefield, Curr observed: ‘I have heard of a lately elected member of the Hutt urging in conversation the wise policy of endeavouring to exclude Australian capitalists from this country.’43 Despite his theory of ‘sufficient price’, Wakefield had advocated free land grants in his own electorate, where his constituents were principally struggling farmers; he had claimed ‘exceptional circumstances demanded exceptional remedies — viz. free land grants to workers’. The irony was not lost on Curr:

The Government seems to have said, poor men, labourers from England are welcome here, — but not capitalists! — no enterprise! — no Australians! — we have monopolized the lands of the country and will keep them.44

Continuing his attack on the Wellington Provincial Council, Curr used Superintendent Featherstone as an example to expose what he saw as vested interests:

Had I, for example, been able to purchase eight or ten thousand acres at 5s. an acre, of the least promising hills on the sheep run of his Honor the Superintendent, I should have fenced it in and improved it, and after the lapse of a few years kept on it three or four times as many sheep as his Honor now depastures on his twenty or twenty-five thousand acres. His Honor would hardly have missed this small slice off his run, and the Government chest would have closed on £2000 of my money, which

42 See Morrell 1966. See also Foster 1966.  
would be available for the acquisition of other lands from the Natives. In these transactions the Province would have been a gainer – but perhaps his Honor would not!  

Curr’s letters reveal him to be a man of the Scottish Enlightenment. His bush library at Tongala in the 1840s had included a copy of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, which clearly influenced his attitudes towards colonial land acquisition. Although Curr did not mention John Locke specifically in his New Zealand letters, he undoubtedly believed that legitimate property rights derived from the mixing of land and labour, and that colonial land policy should reflect this. Interestingly, his economic views regarding the productive use of land, in this case employed against pastoral leaseholders and politicians in New Zealand, also provided the justification for his dispossession of Australian Indigenous landowners in the 1840s. Curr characterised the use of New Zealand land as unproductive and wasteful. His attitude to the jealous hoarders of land among New Zealand’s settler elite is comparable with his attitude to Indigenous land use in the 1840s in the Port Phillip District. In Curr’s mind, he was justified in usurping the land of the Bangerang and Ngooraialum because they were not using it productively; his opposition to New Zealand land policy was similarly motivated, if aimed at quite a different group.

This is not to say that Curr made more than a passing reference to Australian Aborigines in his New Zealand letters. Nevertheless, the brief recognition accorded them provides an insight into Curr’s early views on colonial violence:

> The Australian squatter discovers for himself available country – marks his road with his dray wheels – fights the blacks when necessary, and makes nearly as good a use of the country he occupies as if it were his freehold property.

As Curr would have it, fighting the blacks was merely an inconvenient and regrettable distraction on the path towards productive land use and the creation of wealth. Decades later in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* Curr maintained that he was able to avoid extensive conflict with the Aborigines he dispossessed in the 1840s. When addressing his New Zealand readership in 1855 he provided an explanation for why this might have been so: specifically, he argued that the geographical and demographic conditions in Victoria and New South Wales made conflict less likely: ‘These immense Provinces may be on the whole described as open, easy of access, generally not requiring made roads, and unoccupied by an aboriginal population capable of obstructing the spread of flocks and herds.’

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It is telling that, in a series of letters amounting to several thousand words, Curr said so little about the Australian Aborigines. For Curr, they did not warrant more than a brief mention in a debate about productive land use.

**Droving and Drought**

On 24 January 1856 Curr sailed for Sydney with his wife, young son, and various members of his wider family, proceeding then to Wide Bay north of Brisbane. He had purchased two cattle stations known as Gobongo and Toomcul, which were situated in the Burnett district about halfway between the towns of Gympie and Kingaroy. The stations were stocked with 3,200 head of cattle, for which Curr paid £2.5 per head – a total of £7,200. Arriving at the stations on 6 March 1856, he and several of his brothers began preparations for a formidable droving operation, whereby the cattle were taken overland to Melbourne in two drafts. The economic boom in Victoria ensured the cattle would be sold for a handsome profit in the southern colony. It seems that Curr took primary responsibility for the operation, while various younger brothers were employed to drive the cattle south through New South Wales. On 2 July 1856 Curr entrusted one third of the cattle to his brother Charles, who was paid £150 to see them safely to Melbourne. Curr’s younger brothers Julius and Montagu also assisted with the operation, as did various stockmen employed on short-term contracts. Interestingly, both Edward M. Curr and his brother Charles recorded details of this droving trip in the same journal that Edward had used 18 years earlier when studying in France.49

While his brother Charles was overseeing the first stage of the droving operations, Edward M. Curr travelled to Melbourne, arriving in early August.50 Curr probably travelled ahead of the herd in order to arrange the sale of the cattle once they arrived. In this task he received valuable assistance from his brother-in-law Hastings Cunningham, a cattle grazier who later became a prominent Melbourne wool broker.51 In late October, after the birth of his daughter Constance, Curr left Melbourne and returned to Queensland. He wrote to Charles:

50 E.M.V. Curr, ‘Memoir’ (1872), Murrumbogie Papers.
I start tomorrow for Sydney being on my way to Gobongo to start off to Melbourne the remainder of the cattle, deliver up the station and bring down the ladies – I expect to be in Melbourne about the 6th of January if all goes well.\textsuperscript{52}

Curr sold Gobongo and Toomcul without cattle for £2,000.\textsuperscript{53} Although he did not record the price his cattle fetched in Victoria, his grandson later recorded that they were sold for between £4 and £5 per head.\textsuperscript{54} Even taking into account the cost of employing stockmen and the loss of some cattle, it seems likely that Curr cleared several thousand pounds in only a few months.

\textbf{Figure 14: Eastern Australia.}

Map by Peter Johnson.

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\textsuperscript{52} Edward M. Curr to Charles Curr, 27 October 1856, see Curr, ‘A Journal’ (1838), SLNSW, MLMSS 2286.
\textsuperscript{53} Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
\textsuperscript{54} Curr, Edward A. 1979: 34–36.
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Returning to Melbourne in January 1857, Curr made his home temporarily in St Kilda, although his young son Edward was taken to Tasmania for several months due to poor health. He spent the next year searching for another suitable pastoral investment. His family spent several months at Table Cape in north-east Tasmania, where his second son Wilfred was born in August. Meanwhile, Curr purchased a station on the Lachlan River in New South Wales called Uabba, in partnership with his brothers Richard and Julius. The station lay on the route Curr’s cattle had taken from Queensland to Victoria in 1856. The Curr brothers stocked their new station with 1,000 cattle and by December 1858 Edward had brought his wife and three children to live on the Lachlan River. Richard’s wife Maria also joined them. While the droving venture had been successful, Uabba would prove to be financially ruinous and destroy any chance Curr had of reclaiming the social status his family had enjoyed in the 1840s.

Curr did not record the price he paid for Uabba, nor the cost of the cattle with which he and his brothers stocked the station. It appears, however, that he committed most of his financial resources to the new venture. This proved a fateful decision: three years after purchasing Uabba, Curr and his brothers were forced to abandon the station following a severe drought. Curr’s son Wilfred also died at Uabba in 1860. In his family memoir, Curr devotes very little attention to this sorry period of his life, writing simply that he was ‘ruined whilst there, in consequence chiefly of the dry weather’.  

His son Edward later recorded some more details:

The family left Uabba Station in July 1861, after a drought, when all their cattle died and they kept their best horses alive by feeding them with kurrajong. The Lachlan River stopped running and there were only a few waterholes. They arrived in Melbourne on the 3rd September 1861 in two buggy-loads and some spare horses.

Although Curr’s precise financial situation is unclear, it seems likely he possessed a capital of a several thousand pounds before purchasing Uabba. In September 1861 he returned to Melbourne with ‘£350 in hand, and no more’. It was quite a spectacular fall. In an attempt to rebuild his now modest capital, he returned briefly to horse-trading. He managed to support his family in this way for a little over a year before he began his 27-year career as a stock inspector for the Victorian Government.

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55 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
56 E.M.V. Curr, ‘Memoir’ (1872), Murrumbogie Papers.
57 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.