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VOLUME 29 NO. 1

The spirit of Penney, a biographical sketch of
Richard Penney
Robert Foster

‘The Spirit of the Murray’, a poem by Richard
Penney
(Introduced by Robert Foster)

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The colonist

With these words Richard Penney recalled his feelings while sailing from Gravesend, London, to the new colony of South Australia in September 1839. Penney was born in Poole, Dorsetshire, and he was about twenty four years of age when he departed England. 2 A doctor by profession, Penney worked his passage to the new colony as surgeon aboard the 350 ton barque, the Branken Moor. 3 While he never explained his reason for emigrating to the colony, his continual struggle with consumption while in South Australia suggests that ill-health might have been the motive.

Penney’s published poem, ‘The Spirit of the Murray’ provides some clues to his background and personality. In this largely autobiographical poem, he casts himself as ‘Alciobius’: a man who ‘had drunk from Marah’s bitter waters’ and for whom ‘misfortune was his loved and chosen bride’. 4 The content of the poem, and of later writings, show that he was a classicist at heart, if not by training, and had already pursued this interest in a European ‘Grand Tour’:

He’d roamed the busy fields of Europe o’er,
The Elbe, where commerce long hath built a home,
The Seine, that hath beheld her eagles soar
To vex the eyrie of imperial Rome.
Florence the cradle and the nurse of art,
And Tiber’s capitol of ancient fame.

Besides illustrating that Penney was an adventurous man, such travels, for a man so young, indicate that he came from a well-to-do family.

Penney logged the events of his voyage to the colony in the first part of ‘The Spirit of the Murray’. He records the ship’s passage down the coast of Africa, past Madeira, Tenerife and the slave coast where ‘the lazy strumpet and the convict vile, /the ulcered leper, swine, dogs, pups, and apes/Together live in filth’s most studied style.’ 5 He describes the roughhouse rituals of the equatorial crossing and the sense of liberation as they sail into southern waters where ‘The air grows more ethereal and light’ /The golden heavens are decked with many a star,/That shines not in our darker,

Northern light’.

A fellow passenger aboard the Branken Moor was Alexander Tolmer, later to become the colony’s Police Commissioner. After about a month at sea a member of the crew apparently accused Tolmer of heating his wife. Tolmer went into a rage and marched around the ship with a musket threatening to shoot the slanderer, until the ship’s captain confined him to his quarters. At one stage in the drama, Penney gave an India rubber syringe filled with water to a friend of Tolmer’s wife, with which she was instructed to douse his powder. 6 The only other event of any note during the voyage was a Boxing Day duel between Penney and another passenger called Taylor - using damson stones instead of bullets. The pair’s seconds turned the affair into a farce by loading their pistols with currant jelly. 7 After five months at sea, the Branken Moor disembarked its passengers in Adelaide on 4 February 1840.

Not long after his arrival Penney took up the position of ‘Surgeon to the whale fishery at Encounter Bay.’ 8 Little is known of his life in the district until the dramatic events surrounding the shipwreck of the Maria. On the 25 July 1840, Dr. Penney and Sgt. McFarlane received news from Encounter Bay Bob, an Aboriginal man, that the survivors of a shipwreck near Kingston, had been massacred by Aborigines. 9 The victims were the passengers and crew of the brigantine Maria that had been wrecked on the south coast, near Kingston, on or about the 28 June 1840.10 After hearing news of the shipwreck, Captain W. J. S. Pullen, the government’s Marine Surveyor, organised a party to search for survivors. Dr Penney volunteered his services and they were joined by a police officer and three Aborigines, Encounter Bay Bob, One-Arm Charley and Peter. 11 The expedition departed on Thursday morning, 30 July, and by the end of that day they had already discovered the half-buried remains of more than half a dozen Europeans. On 1 August they came upon a group of Aborigines wearing blankets and odd items of clothing that had belonged to the survivors of the shipwreck. Pullen reported:

From the silence of this party when questioned respecting the murder, their apparent uneasiness at our presence - more especially when I began to search the pockets of a shooting coat and sailor’s Flushing jacket, worn by two of the party, and the covering of a woman’s bonnet, I was confident we were among the guilty parties, and if looks were a sufficient condemnation, there were two who were certainly possessed of such for, without exception, they were the most villainous looking characters I ever saw. 12

The investigations along the Coorong continued for another week before Pullen returned to Adelaide and submitted his report to the Governor. Gawler, in consultation with his Council, organised a punitive expedition under the command of Major O’Halloran. His instructions were to try any Aborigines suspected of taking part in the massacre and, if any were found guilty, to execute them on the spot. 13 O’Halloran’s expedition resulted in two Aborigines being shot while trying to escape capture, and two others being hanged, one for complicity in the Maria massacre and another for murdering the whaler Roach a year or so before. 14 The local Aborigines, assembled to witness the executions, were
instructed to leave the bodies hanging from the makeshift gallows as a warning to others. A furor later erupted over the legality of O’Halloran’s actions. It was argued, particularly in the pages of the South Australian Register that, as Aborigines were British subjects, they had a constitutional right to trial by jury and the Governor’s instructions were illegal. The British Government agreed and suggested that Gawler might be tried for murder. No charges were ever laid. There is no evidence to suggest that Penney accompanied O’Halloran’s punitive expedition down the Coorong.

The conciliator

After an interview with Governor Gawler, early in November 1840, Penney was appointed ‘Medical Assistant to the Aborigines of Encounter Bay’. The health of the Aborigines in this district had been a concern to the Government, especially the prevalence of venereal diseases. The problem appears to have arisen because of the long association of whalers and scalers with the Aborigines of the area. Penney had originally planned to establish a medical depot on Granite Island, but by February 1841, equipped with a spare whale boat from the Fishing Company at Encounter Bay, he had set himself up at Pullen’s station at Goolwa (Polpolda). He reported that a few individuals were suffering badly from the disease, but most were only slightly affected. Apart from the medical assistance he was required to render, Penney claimed that Gawler also instructed him ‘to communicate with’ the Milmenura tribe ‘and establish amicable relations with them’. Penney spent most of 1841 engaged in this task. No white men, according to Penney, would work with him in the district because of the fearsome reputation of the Milmenura. The Milmenura people, or ‘Big Murray tribe’, were the group held responsible for the massacre of the Maria survivors. However, Penney did persuade five Aboriginal men who had worked at the whale fishery to accompany him.

One of the consequences of O’Halloran’s Coorong expedition was that it sparked a virtual war among the Aboriginal people of the district, with the ‘Milmenura’ lining up against the Encounter Bay and Lower Murray groups who had assisted the Europeans. In a report from January 1841 Penney wrote:

After a meeting of the Milmenura tribes, as has been reported to me by Encounter Bay Bob, which occurred two days after the Commissioner of Police had left the scene of execution with his party, the Milmenura tribe, or part of them, met around the bodies of the murderers and agreed that they would kill every white man who came within their reach, and that any black tribe who communicated of a friendly nature with us, should be on the same footing. I have understood that extravagant threats and vows have been made against Peter, One-Armed Charley and Encounter Bay Bob, and it was the intended lubra of Bob, that was recently murdered by Tom, of the Milmenura nation, at Encounter Bay. Many months later Penney reported that of the two men who had crewed the whale boat during his travels up and down the Coorong had also been killed in fulfilment of these threats.

Hearing information about the discovery of another body on the Coorong, Penney set off from Goolwa on the 10 April 1841 with a ‘crew of eight natives of our tribe’ presumably Aborigines from the Encounter Bay area. His principal guide, Peter, led him to Noongong, on the Coorong near Long Point, where they found the bodies of an additional three men and one woman. On the following day he interviewed a party of Aborigines who told him that they had led the survivors all the way up the Coorong, fishing for them and carrying their children, but that when they reached the end of their country they refused to proceed any further. They demanded food and clothing from the whites, who refused them, and when they started to take what they wanted a fight ensued resulting in the killing of all the survivors. Penney reported these findings in a letter to Governor Gawler in April 1841 and he discussed them publicly in a lecture delivered in Adelaide on 25 June 1841. Penney, even though he supported Governor Gawler’s actions, was one of the only people to investigate the Aboriginal version of the events surrounding the massacre.

Penney reported that during his early trips down the Coorong he had trouble making contact with the people, but after a few weeks ‘they became less reserved and by degrees I became acquainted with nearly the whole of the tribe and acquired their confidence’. Penney claimed that he periodically visited all ‘their stations’ coming and going from ‘Cootoongwald, the police Station on the Goolwa, up the S. E. branch or across Lake Albert for six months’. Writing in January 1842, Penney claimed that he had visited the tribes at intervals of about a month and that he felt as safe ‘between Cape Jervis and Cape Jaffa as in the streets of Adelaide and as little liable to be plundered’.

In his public lectures and correspondence with the Government, Penney portrayed himself as the conciliator of the feared Milmenura. Of the clashes between the Milmenura tribes and those of the Lower Murray and Encounter Bay, Penney wrote:

I reported the circumstances to the Government and by degrees opened a friendly communication with two of the principal tribes, the Arongolingera and Toorar. I staid amongst them on one occasion for nearly a week with none but the crew of five natives, with whom they soon became cry intimate. After having detailed to a large number the evils of their hostility, both to themselves and our tribes, they promised not to join in any further aggressions, and I believe that these two people will not disturb each other again.

Late in 1842 Penney wrote an article for The Examiner in which he proposed a solution to the conflict in the Port Lincoln district. He pointed out that the actions of the overlanders and stockmen on the Murray had ‘put the Aborigines in their place’ and that Eyre had ‘followed this up by a course of conciliation’ that had proved successful. Penney then pointed out that similar course of conciliation had been pursued by Gawler toward the Milmenura. While not referring to himself, Penney was clearly referring to his own operations among the Aborigines of the Lower Murray and Coorong.
Penney’s most vivid recollections of his period on the Coorong are found not in his reports to government, nor in his newspapers articles of the day, but in his long poem ‘Spirit of the Murray’. The second, third and fourth parts of the poem are almost entirely devoted to the time he spent on the Coorong with his five Aboriginal companions. Penney wrote of learning ‘the language of the wild’ and the ‘story of the stars’ while he went about his task of tending to the sick. Of his relationship with the Aborigines, Penney wrote that he was monarch of their commonwealth’ and of his crew:

His mariners were all of native mould,
Armed with the modern requisites of war,
As many an echo of the Murray told,
And may be seen in many a traitor’s scar.

In part four of the poem, which is in the form of a pastoral idyll, Penney describes his Aboriginal companions, armed with muskets and accompanied by their hunting dogs of ‘Van Dieman’s breed’, setting out to secure a meal of kangaroo. In the following passage Penney describes the return of the hunters and the commencement of the day’s work:

The crew returned with a supply of game,
The kettle soon was emptied of the tea,
The sticker-up which, broiled before the flame,
Did, with the ash-baked damper, well agree.
All these consumed with relish and a grace,
Which, if not said by hungry folks, is meant -
And having rinsed his hands and hairy face,
Alcibius, to the boat, the natives sent.
Some the tarpaulin, some the oars and sail -
By which his simple tent was nightly made -
Did carry down the bank, and one did bale
The water out, and all in order laid.
When everything was placed on board, and stowed
Under the sheets, and fore and aft the boat,
They shoved off with their ashen oars, and rowed
Clear of the point, and in mid lake did float.

References to the use of dogs from Van Dieman’s land and facility in the handling of firearms would seem strange if not for the fact that these men were Encounter Bay Aborigines: experienced oarsman who had worked with the whalers and seaters for a number of years. In this region, Aboriginal contact with Europeans pre-dated the foundation of the colony by almost twenty years.

With Gawler’s recall and the establishment of Governor Grey’s regime of financial stringency, Penney soon lost the modest support he previously received from the Government. Submitting a report in August 1841, detailing an expedition down the Coorong, Penney asked if the Governor would continue his post, as his only other employment then was collecting natural history specimens with a friend. Grey replied that as much as he would like to continue the support, the colony’s financial difficulties prevented him from doing so.

In the later part of 1841 and the early months of 1842, Penney made a series of applications to the Governor for a position working among the Aborigines. In July 1841, responding to the recent clashes on the overland route along the Murray River, Penney proposed leading an Aboriginal police force - a sort of ‘Tactical Response Group’ - ‘to put an end to any hostilities or render assistance anywhere on the Murray’. Basing himself at Goolwa, he hoped to use his whaleboat and the crew of five Aborigines he had used on the Coorong. Of his crew, he wrote, ‘they can speak and understand the English language, their fidelity has been proved, they have been accustomed to be obedient and can use a musket if necessary.

Grey admired his ‘spirited offer’, but pointed out that the Government could not afford to support such a plan. Penney made a similar proposal in January 1842, on this occasion planning to base himself at Eyre’s station at Moorundie. The Governor saw no likelihood of posting him at Moorundie, where Eyre was already established, but some thought was given to establishing him at the Broughton or Hull rivers in the north. In the end Grey replied that as much as he wished to reward Penney’s exertions, there were simply no funds to support him.

In April 1842 Penney again petitioned the Governor for a post to conciliate the Aborigines of the Port Lincoln district. The Colonial Secretary in reply pointed out that the Government was satisfied with the existing Protector and that the settlement was too small for two such officers. Penney took offence at the Government’s reply, which inferred that he was acting dishonestly towards a friend - Clamor Schurmann - whose position he was allegedly trying to take. He claimed he was misunderstood and that the position he sought was a temporary one, with the simple objective of restoring order in the district ‘which I beg humbly to submit to Your Excellency, that you have it not in your power to do’. His response was anything but humble. In another letter to the Colonial Secretary he stressed that he had not sought the Protector’s post, writing: ‘I should not have asked any situation that could have implied my desire of leading so inactive a life as that of Protector of Aborigines - as we find it exemplified here...

This was Penney’s last attempt for some time at securing a government post in connection with the Aborigines - although he did not give up such hopes. In August 1842 he submitted a plan to the Government to ameliorate the condition of female prostitutes in Adelaide. Toward the end of the letter he observed:
Your petitioner has now been more than two years in this Province and has been an attentive, if not correct observer of the relations of the several grades and classes of our Colonial Society, with the view, eventually, to operate in ii in advocacy of the claims of the Aboriginal tribes. 43

The advocate
By early 1842 Penney began directing his energies into literary channels. On previous visits to Adelaide he had submitted lengthy articles about his experiences among the Aborigines to the South Australian Register, and in March the first part of his poem ‘The Spirit of the Murray’ was published in the South Australian Magazine. As 1842 progressed he became increasingly associated with The Examiner, first as a correspondent, then assistant editor, and by early August as sole editor of the newspaper. 44 In his role as correspondent (under various aliases) and as editor, he frequently wrote on issues concerning the Aborigines. His most significant contributions were to the debate concerned the ‘civilisation and Christianisation’ of the Aborigines. The colonists had little doubt of their right to dispossess the Aborigines of their land, but many also believed they had a moral obligation to find a place for them in the new social order. How was this to be achieved? How were the Aborigines to be raised up from their ‘lowly state’? How important was ‘Christianisation’ to this process? 45 These were the sorts of questions Penney tackled in The Examiner; his suggestions often at odds with the prevailing views of his society.

Penney held the view that there was no essential distinction between the races. He believed that the colonists generally had a false, and unnecessarily negative, view of the Aborigines:

It is much to be regretted, that the impossibility of our reclaiming our native tribes, and of the certainty of their ultimate extinction, should gain ground. To entertain such an idea beforehand, is halfway to carrying it into execution; it amounts to nothing less than a cold-blooded accession to (their) destruction..... 46

He criticised the apathy of his fellows who believed ‘civilization a hopeless undertaking’ without ever having attempted a system ‘founded on a knowledge of their habits and feelings’. 47

Penney was a stern critic of the efforts undertaken at the Aborigines Location in Adelaide. This was an area set aside in the Adelaide parklands where the Government endeavoured to ‘civilize’ the Aborigines. It was here that the Protector and missionaries instructed the Aborigines in agriculture, tried to persuade them to live in houses and brought to them the word of God. 48 Penney described these efforts as nothing more than ‘a paraphernalia of outward show’ designed to convince the British Government and the missionary supporters that something was being done. 49 In September 1842, Penney responded to a published report by Christian Teichelmann, taking the missionary to task over his claims concerning the alleged ‘stubbornness and depravity’ of the Aborigines. As evidence of their depravity, Teichelmann cited the fact that the boys and girls would not go to school of their own accord. Penney replied,

...if Mr. Teichelmann were to enquire from the families of his English neighbours, he would find, that there is just as much difficulty in persuading little white boys to go to school of their own accord, as he has with his obstinate black juveniles. 50

Teichelmann’s other complaint was that the Aborigines refused to attend his preaching on the Sabbath because they had to leave town in search of food. Penney claimed that this was perfectly rational behaviour and suggested that many pious Europeans would ‘hesitate between going to Church and losing the dinner’. 51

Penney questioned the central principle that the missionaries used in their attempts to civilize the Aborigines; that ‘nothing but continued and persevering teaching of the Gospel could (recall) them from their degraded condition and depraved state’. 52 Penney argued that such efforts were overrated, that the Aborigine ‘cannot be preached into a civilized man’. 53 He suggested that it was the depravity of the Europeans, rather than of the Aborigines, that was the main bar to their civilization and the only answer was to instruct them in a situation ‘removed from the demoralising and distracting influences of European Society’. 54 In another article he suggested that the missionaries had a ‘better chance of gaining admission to the hearts and understandings of a tribe by living amongst them in their own haunts, where they lead an easy existence without much interruption from the Europeans’. 55 Writing in January 1843, Penney’s criticism of the German missionaries became more blunt; he described them as a millstone hanging around the neck of the Protector:

The natives do not like them, they see that there is a wide difference of race, character and language, between the English and German - they have probably been accustomed to hear other white men speak anything but respectfully of them, from whatever cause it may arise; - in fact they despise them and these individuals seem doomed to see their best intentions frustrated by circumstances over which they have no control. 56

Penney implied that the prevailing view of the Aborigines was based on those encountered daily begging in the streets - those ‘depraved’ by contact with European society. He believed that this distorted perception of Aboriginal society needed correction:

We apprehend that the reason why systems for the civilization of the Aborigines have failed, is that suitable persons have not been employed in carrying them into operation, that they have been based on theories founded on the most absurd notions and estimations of the character of the people on whom they have been intended to operate. 57

Penney made some efforts to correct these ‘absurd notions’. He argued, for instance, that Aboriginal society was ‘exceedingly systematic’; that those willing to look would find ‘that there is nothing that takes place amongst them, that is not regulated by some rule, or which, on explanation, is not founded on a process of reasoning or the result of close
and accurate observation’. Furthermore, he claimed that relations between families and individuals were governed by ‘the strictest formality, courtesy and decorum’. Penney argued that Aboriginal society exhibited a collectivist identity, quite unlike that of his own culture.

In small wandering tribes, there exists little feeling of individuality, and an individual is of no consequence personally, but each man represents the importance of his whole tribe. He has no property or feeling, apart from his family and race...
The calls, interests, and customs of his tribe, are held paramount to every other consideration, and everything and person, exterior or apart from it, would be sacrificed and disregarded, when brought into collision with them.  

It was for this reason, Penney argued, that previous attempts to ‘civilise particular individuals’ had failed.

Penney again revealed his insight into the nature of Aboriginal society when he responded, as editor, to an article in the Southern Australian that had come to the defence of the German missionaries after his criticism. The writer of the article suggested that the ‘secret want of success’ lay ‘in the Aborigines themselves’, in their wandering habits, dislike of instruction, and their corruption by European society. The writer argued that ‘until they are removed to a place where they will be under restraint, and control, that little good will be done’. Penney responded by pointing out that as British subjects the Aborigines had as much right to freedom as anyone else. More importantly, perhaps, he contested the notion that the Aborigines ‘wandered aimlessly over the landscape’. This perception of the Aborigines as a sort of stateless and homeless people was constantly expressed in the early years of settlement, it was a convenient justification: how could the colonists be dispossessing a people who have no fixed abodes? Penney, contradicting this view, wrote:  

. . . with respect to their wandering habits, these are only so to a particular extent and as the seasons oblige them to change their places of resort a few miles, for the convenience of the vicinity of their supplies of food; they are not more so than the English nation who during the summer emigrate from the towns to the country, to the fashionable watering places or even to the continent of Europe.

In all his articles Penney expressed the firm belief that the Aborigines were as able and intelligent as most Europeans and, given the right conditions, would readily take their place in European society. Penney drew on his experiences at Encounter Bay in support of his claims. In an article published in November 1840, Penney sang the praises of the Aborigines of the Lower Murray and Encounter Bay who, without the prodding of Protectors and missionaries, were already working for the whites. He pointed out the many young men who worked at the fisheries, noting that while the whalers might not set the best moral example, they nonetheless ‘stimulated the natives to industry’. Penney pointed Out that some had worked cutting posts and rails for fencing, others as bullock drivers, they had employed their skills in tracking cattle and horses, and even as divers salvaging goods and equipment from wrecks in the Bay. In a letter to the Governor written in July 1841, Penney advocated a plan of giving inducements to settlers who employed Aborigines. He saw this as a method of ‘reclaiming them’ while providing the settlers with a regular work force. Penney claimed many Aborigines were ‘anxious’ to find employment with the Europeans but were discouraged by the ‘bad faith’ of the settlers:  

Caressed and receiving a large remuneration for trifling services one day, and being denied a morsel or driven from the door the next, which is a tolerably correct description of the treatment they receive, entirely confounds all ideas of the value of labour and shakes their confidence in the faith of the employer, it also acts as a discouragement to them.

Penney struck on a crucial issue, usually ignored in the ‘civilization and Christianisation’ debates, when he pointed out what a potentially bad bargain ‘coming in’ entailed:  
The experiences of a season will prove that a native will work as hard as another, when treated with familiarity and fairness; nor is it reasonable that it should be otherwise, for we can never do anything with them unless by letting them feel that they are considered as equals. Amongst themselves they are in a state of equality, and know of no superior but in physical power; directly they become civilized men they will find themselves in the lowest class of the community, with hardly a chance of rising in the scale. Thus it is that we have difficulty in making them believe, that, in what we can offer them, they will find any compensation for the liberty they at present enjoy.

In March 1843 Penney wrote a seemingly innocuous article concerning the site of the new Corn Exchange in Adelaide. Emanuel Solomon wanted the Exchange located in his idle theatre in Glues street, but Penney argued that the location, in one of the seedier parts of town, was unsuitable. It appears that the site favoured by Penney was a temporary building adjoining the Adelaide Auction Company - the association of which was the cause of some concern. Penney wrote:  

I do not see what this has to do with the question of a Corn Exchange, and it would be equally as good an objection for us to make that the Exchange should not be held at the Theatre because the proprietor of it is a Jew, (which, God forbid, should be any argument now.)

Solomon took offence, and in a sarcastic rejoinder published in a rival newspaper, claimed he was being ‘taunted with his religion’. The day after the letter was published Solomon met Penney in the street and, in the words of 1 he Examiner, Penney was knocked down and brutally kicked in every part of the body.
For Penney, who had been suffering from consumption for the previous six months, the assault proved to be the last straw. Several days later he submitted a memorial to Governor Grey asking to be appointed as Medical Officer at Port Lincoln, a district that had been without a medical man since the death of the Harbour Master, Dr. Harvey. Penney also claimed that it was the wish of settlers in the district that ‘I should also be brought into communication with the aboriginal tribes in order that the possibility of conciliating and keeping them in control by moral power and influence may be tested by one not unused or a stranger to the native character.’

Although Penney had been a sharp critic of Grey, the Governor granted him an interview on the following day. The interview was successful and several days later Penney’s lead article in The Examiner announced that he was resigning as editor of the newspaper ‘on account of the very precarious state of my health, which renders it absolutely necessary for me to avoid every needless source of mental and corporeal excitement.’ A month later Penney was officially appointed as surgeon to the ‘Military and Police at Port Lincoln, as well as to their wives and families’ at a salary of £50 per annum. He arrived in the Port Lincoln district in June or July of 1843. On 20 July 1843 he wrote a letter to the Adelaide Observer in which he gave his opinion of the state of the district. In the letter Penney observed the good effect Major O’Halloran’s recent visit to the area had had on the Aboriginal population, ‘as it has shown them our means of visiting them for their misdeeds’. He suggested that the Aborigines would never have been the problem they were if it had not been for the ‘want of courage’ displayed by the former settlers. As Penney showed in his support of Gawler’s actions on the Coorong, he was a believer in ‘shows of force’ to quickly and decisively ‘pacify’ the Aborigines in troubled regions. Late in 1843 he submitted his first report in his capacity as Medical Officer, pointing out that he had very little to do so far and outlining his plans to assist the Aborigines once he had made some progress in learning their language. On 6 November 1843 Penney submitted the last part of his poem ‘Spirit of the Murray’, to the South Australian Magazine. In the introduction Penney wrote ‘a long continuation of ill-health has prevented me from sending it in an earlier period - and, indeed, may perhaps prevent me from preparing much more of the work for publication, and carrying it out as I once hoped to do.’ Richard Penney died of consumption at Port Lincoln on 15 January 1844.

Conclusion
In the 1929-30 session of the South Australian branch of the Royal Geographical Society, A. A. Lendon presented a short biographical essay on Dr. Richard Penney in which he portrays him as a tragi-comic figure deserving of little more than pity. He makes only passing reference to Penney’s poem ‘The Spirit of the Murray’ and appears entirely ignorant of I his output as editor of The Examiner. Lendon badly misrepresents Penney whose short life, while certainly tragic, was also exceptionally active and productive. Penney saw himself as an outsider, part Byron and part Quixote - comfortable in his chosen role as Devils Advocate. Perhaps it is Penney who best sums up his own character when, in a passage from the introduction to a section of ‘The Spirit of the Murray’ he presents himself - in the guise of his imaginary author - in the following terms:

The author evidently intends to give a description of that desultory sort of life, which has been the chosen path of a few singular persons, who either are, or imagine themselves to be, intellectually, out of the line of ordinary mortals, and, in their estimation of things, take a different standard from that which is orthodox. These are not exactly madmen, they ought rather to be called miserable men, to whom philosophy brings no delight, religion no comfort, and in the end they too frequently become the victims of misanthropy, or the inmates of bedlam.

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By the end of 1843, Solomons ‘Queen’s Theatre’ became a temporary site for the colony’s Supreme Court. A. Castles & M. Harris, Lawmakers and Wayward Whigs (Adelaide 1987), pp. 81-84.

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GRG 24/4. 13 April 1843.

The Adelaide Observer, 5 August 1843

GRG 24/6. No. 1363.


South Australian Register, 6 March 1844.

In his article, Lendon wrote that he ‘had been informed’ that Penney was ‘the Editor of an Adelaide paper’, but he did not know what newspaper it was. A. A. Lendon, ‘Dr. Richard Penney (1840-44)’, Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, SA Branch, 1929-30, vol 31, pp. 20- 32.