

## Heimat Melbourne

### A history of the German-speaking community of Melbourne 1855-1865

Volkhard Wehner, Author and Publisher, Melbourne 2010

*Transcript of Michael Clyne's address to officially launched the book in the Rare Books section of the Sir Louis Matheson library at Monash University on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2010.*

For those of us who have written books and have impatiently wanted them to finish after two or three years, the very thought of Volkhard Wehner spending 35 years preparing a monograph on Melbourne's German-speaking community from 1855 to 1865 makes him someone whose perseverance has to be revered. No doubt Volkhard's own migration history about a century later is a strong motivational factor for him. But why is this detailed study of a 2,000 strong community in the formative years of European settlement (1861 census) of significance to the general reader? This is a story of people who migrated from a Germany that not yet existed as a national entity to an embryonic Australia that did not yet exist as a nation.

Although the Commonwealth of Australia has been operating for over a century, people are constantly discussing what is different about their own capital city. I believe Volkhard's book provide evidence that what makes Melbourne different is its multiculturalism from the earliest days of the European settlement as illustrated by the largest non-British group, the Germans. The study is presented against the background of German history and Australian migration history. Melbourne is described by contemporary sources as a cosmopolitan city of beautiful buildings providing entertainment and information, with a democratic spirit and in which everything comes to a standstill on Sundays. German migration was motivated by the 1848 revolutions, spillover from the rural settlements, and the gold rush. What Foolhardy describes as freedom and justice had become the basis of Australian society, something which the newspapers editors adapted to. Yes, there were complaints – about the abolition of assisted passages, about the nationality criterion for land ownership, about prejudice. Volkhard's study depicts a German community of *Bildungsbürger*, a professional and business elite which played an over proportionate part in the development of the fledgling city into marvelous Melbourne. They saw themselves as more open minded and a cut above uneducated Anglos who were prejudiced against Germans and also prejudiced against others. In contrast to the denigration of Chinese in the Anglo press, *Melbourn Deutsche Zeitung* comments favourably on the modesty and discipline of the Chinese (p.89).

Imagine a community including Ferdinand Mueller, Georg Neumayer, Eugen von Guérard, Ludwig Becker, Karl Damm, William Brahe, conductor and composer Carl Elsässer and many more distinguished men.

Alongside the Melbourne German community were the close rural settlements of Doncaster/Waldau, Westgarthtown (Thomastown) and Harkaway/Berwick which started as German settlements and gradually absorbed non-German Australians. Volkhard draws attention to the cohesion within the German community, the part played by the elite, the *Deutscher Verein* and the Melbourne-German newspapers, of which there were six in the period, with the twin aims – cultural and political (enfranchising Germans, something that had been achieved even more in South Australia. (Vic Dt Ztg, Der Kosmopolit, Melb Dt Ztg, Dt Ztg f Austr, Dt Ztg, Germania, other Püttmann)

The book is structured around chapters on the German-Australian press, the Lutheran church and other religious institutions, schools, medical services, the business community, scientists, musicians, artists and architects, writers, publishers and the theatre, and explorers. Each group is discussed in a general section and then there is an alphabetical index of the people in the category. The chapters are well contextualized.

The chapter on the press shows the fortunes of the various newspapers, their editors, and some content analysis among other things presenting attitudes. Schisms in the Lutheran Church are balanced alongside the strength of the *Dreifaltigkeitskirche* in East Melbourne. The importance of bilingual education and of learning in the German community is given prominence and the establishment and short-lived nature of private schools is demonstrated. It is interesting that the bilingual school at Harkaway near Berwick lasted 20 years while the one in Waldau, now Doncaster, became an English-speaking school after five years. The importance of the Germans in both music and art in the colony is borne out by the relevant chapters. The Germans who wrote literature were largely intellectuals who saw the emerging Australian nation as a land of the future. A contemporary, Dr John Macadam, secretary of the Royal Society of Victoria, is quoted as asking: 'What state would Science in Victoria have reached without the Germans?' Because of the holistic German tradition of Science represented by Alexander von Humboldt for instance, many of the people written up by Volkhard are explorers, naturalists and artists. Apart from Ferdinand Mueller the leading internationally acclaimed German scientist in Melbourne in the period under review was Professor Georg Balthasar Neumayer, who came to conduct magnetic and meteorological observations and like Mueller gave focus to the importance of studying the uniqueness offered by Australia and Victoria. The biographies of German scientists are very impressive and, Volkhard notes that through patronage they worked together though eventually some were pushed away by Anglo-Celtic Australians perhaps, he suggests, by the tall poppy syndrome. How the interaction of Germans and Anglo-Australians could play out in practice is described in the treatment of Ludwig Becker and some other Germans in the tense human relations within the fateful Burke and Wills exploration team to the interior of Australia which was instigated largely by German-Australian scientists. Yet in Volkhard's judgment Becker's sketches and paintings constituted the greatest achievement of the expedition.

In the final chapter, some of the community leaders are discussed – people of achievement and effective leadership, with considerable political naiveté.

There was a time when the non-Anglo-Celtic contribution to Australia was largely swept under the carpet. Generations of historians will be grateful to Volkhard, the author-historian and Volkhard the publisher for documenting the achievements of German-Australian pioneers, 'conformist, pliable, adaptable' but distinctive, and contributing to nation-building..

*The first edition is only 150 copies and can be purchased for \$35 + postage by contacting the author: <http://www.volkhardwehner.com/>*