

Chapter 1 MOTION (from 1879)



The Australian International Exhibition of 1879 – Colonial pride – ‘Self-help’ and self-made exemplars – Colonial growth – Impact of the Exhibition

The time will come when we shall pass
the actors in each varying scene;
and all that is, or may have been
Fly like the shadows from the grass.

Henry Halloran, 1880

The Australian International Exhibition of 1879

It seemed that the whole population of Sydney had come out to take part in the general rejoicing. The heavy rain which deluged the city for days had given way to the bright spring sunshine. Colours splashed the length of Macquarie Street where the large crowds watched the grand procession making its way down to the Inner Domain of the Governor's grounds overlooking the Botanic Gardens. The Governor, Lord Loftus, newly arrived in the colony, led the march escorted by mounted troopers. Following were foreign commissioners and consuls, members of friendly societies and bands – all in costume, uniform or full dress. The dense banks of spectators on either side of the street, wearing their best and brightest clothes and craning

to catch sight of the procession, showed that it was unmistakably a holiday. Flags of a multitude of nations added to the brilliant spectacle.

It was the morning of 17 September 1879. The crowd was assembled for the opening of the first Australian International Exhibition. Great numbers were massed before the official stands erected at the entrance to the Exhibition Palace, which stood near Government House on the grounds that had formerly been the private park of the governors of New South Wales.

Cantatas were sung after the Governor unveiled a statue of Queen Victoria on Macquarie Street. The jubilant sounds of the massed choirs swelled above the crowd already stirred by the splendour of the moment. Expressing the crowd's excitement, the choirs sang the choral poem *Victory*, composed by local rhymer Henry Halloran. Under-Secretary of the Colonial Secretary's Department since 1866, and having recently retired, he momentarily caught the crowd's attention. The sunlight glinted on the seven-armed white Maltese cross badge of the Companions of St Michael and St George that he was wearing, adding to the lustre of the decoration which signified his dedication to British interests, having served in the civil service since 1827.

Another poem came from Halloran's friend, the poet Henry Kendall. With the majestic sound of the full orchestra, organ and nearly 800 singers, children sang that 'Australia's dark mysterious yesterday' was gone. Kendall invited the world to share their pride. Towering over the crowd stood the grand central dome of the Garden Palace, the Exhibition's main building. Sixth largest in the world, its height matched that of the dome of St Paul's in London.¹ Kendall marvelled, 'Shining nations! Let them see, how like England we can be'.²

Colonial pride

Few could avoid being curious about the rapidly assembled building. The building's size – with its dome and four towers – made it appear like a 'veritable dream of fairyland'. To the crowd, the Garden Palace matched London's Crystal Palace, erected in 1851 for Britain's Great Exhibition. That had been called the Temple of the Works of Industry of All Nations. It opened a new era in industrial progress.³ The Garden Palace was Australia's own such temple.

More feelings of wonder and admiration were drawn by its displays. On show were commercial and industrial exhibits from over 9,000 different

exhibitors from some twenty nations and colonies.⁴ The relative skills of their manufacturers, designers and artisans could be compared.

When announcing the commissioners appointed to manage the Exhibition, Sir Henry Parkes, the Premier of New South Wales, boasted that Australia's Mother Colony would win its way among the proudest states of the civilised world. The Exhibition, the building housing it, and its associated pavilions, would prove that New South Wales came first, not only among the colonies but among the free states in the world.⁵

Everyone agreed. The first Australian International Exhibition was a defining event. Over the following seven months, more than three-quarters of the colony's population would visit the building and its displays (along with the other separate but adjacent buildings housing more displays).⁶

The weight of Kendall's words escaped most in the crowd, more focused on the feast awaiting them among the displays, as his words rang out:

Mighty nations! Let them view,
Sons of generous sires in you.

As the throng milled through the lofty Palace and among the exhibits, one particular man heeded how Kendall marked Sydney's achievement beyond all the show – with a backward glance at a past with which most in the crowd were little concerned.

Slender and with regular features, David Scott Mitchell stood neatly attired in his frock coat. Correct in his bearing, a full black beard offset his slightly receding hairline. His complexion appeared paler than most in the crowd, with their faces touched by sun. His deep-set, hooded eyes studied the scene. Then aged forty-three, he had followed the lead-up to the event closely since his sprightly friend, Sir Alfred Stephen, besides acting as colonial Governor for much of the year, presided over the preparations for the Exhibition.⁷

Indeed there was much there in the exhibitions to interest Mitchell as a connoisseur. The biggest collection of art seen in the colonies – including the first exhibition of foreign contemporary art – was on view in the Art Annexe.⁸ Examples and illustrations of ethnology, native weaponry and the like were displayed in the 200-foot-long gallery between the eastern tower and the grand central dome of the Palace. Books featured prominently. The notable

international publisher Nicholas Trübner, whose company was the London agent for Sydney's Free Public Library, displayed stock on large revolving bookcases.⁹ As a bibliophile, Mitchell naturally could not resist exploring what was there.

Printed material was a central focus in the British Pavilion. On the walls hung engravings displayed by respected Fleet Street publishers Sampson, Marston and Associates, best known for publishing the popular novelist Wilkie Collins.¹⁰ There were maps from the London map-maker, bookseller and publisher Edward Stanford. Unusual theatrical programmes also drew attention with their illustrated covers and caricature figures.¹¹ More books were exhibited by other publishers like William Collins and Company. As well, some thirty trade journals from England were to be seen. And a good hour could be spent inspecting the work of war correspondents from the nearly ten-year-old London *Graphic* newspaper, which also offered insight into the inner work of an illustrated newspaper office.

Making his way through the pavilion, Mitchell could not have escaped encountering a prominent new arrival in Sydney. The English journalist, John Plummer, was commissioner for the British exhibitors. Connected with the London *Graphic*, Plummer was known to Australians as the London correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for which he wrote the column 'Social Affairs in England'.¹² Australians regarded Plummer as well-qualified to convey English impressions of colonial affairs. Visitors to the pavilion crowded around Plummer to hear him describe several of the many erroneous ideas about Australia which, to his mind, persisted in Britain. In his view, the upper classes were perhaps the most ignorant as their knowledge was largely derived from wealthy Australians living in England, who were hardly the kind of folk to provide the English aristocracy with exalted notions of colonial society. Their claims to be regarded as colonial representatives were to be discounted, as Plummer saw it. 'They were too fond of displaying their wealth, boasting of the high prices given by them for furniture, and pictures, and so forth.'¹³ Plummer's views went beyond the self-congratulation then prevailing in New South Wales. Mitchell was sympathetic to such views.

'Self-help' and self-made exemplars

Plummer offered another distinction, being celebrated as one of the subjects of the popular book *Our Exemplars Poor and Rich* (1860).¹⁴ This sketched the biographies of self-reliant men and women who had overcome obstacles and

become benefactors of their country, like Sir Rowland Hill, author of the penny post. All had succeeded by using what the Victorian era described as 'useful knowledge'.¹⁵

From an impoverished background, Plummer had overcome disadvantage and got ahead in life by virtue of self-education. The Northamptonshire stay-maker rose to prominence when defending his brother's right to work as a self-taught cobbler against a trade group seeking to decide who could take up shoe-making. Plummer wrote a prize-winning essay arguing the right to work.¹⁶ This brought him to the attention of reform politician Lord Brougham, and Plummer became a journalist. Childhood deprivations had left him handicapped with poor hearing, which he overcame with a quick and wide-ranging eye for detail. Appreciating that knowledge of a practical character promised advancement toward well-being, he lectured widely on the value of technical education and how it might be furthered.¹⁷

Plummer exemplified the Victorian principle of 'self-help'. He was an exemplary self-made man; in this, he resembled many of the Australians crowding around him.

Colonial growth

Given his turn of mind, these were likely Mitchell's reflections as he made his way through the crowd in the pavilion. The prideful sentiments abounding during the Exhibition would have led him to reflect on the past. Historical sense was natural to him, having been born in Sydney when Britons had been settled there for just forty-eight years. When Mitchell was born, the population of the entire area of New South Wales (which included the present Victoria and Queensland), numbered about 85,000. More than half of this number were, or had been, convicts.

In 1879 when Henry Parkes announced the Exhibition, he pronounced that its aim was 'to make Australia a country all may well be proud of and to make its prosperity, its true fame, its title to consideration amongst the civilized powers, inferior to those of no other country on the face of the earth'.¹⁸ This sentiment was behind the commemorative gold medal issued to celebrate the Exhibition. It featured the motto 'Recently risen, how brightly you shine'. This slogan came from the veteran English-born university professor Charles Badham (who had arrived in the colony twelve years before). It expressed the pride that the Mother Colony took in winning (as Parkes had hoped) its position to host the first

Australasian world exposition. Furthermore, it matched the forward-looking rhetoric of the times.¹⁹ In the words of Kendall's cantata, this achievement promised future triumph: 'the splendid marvel of the years to be'.

Badham's motto carried particular significance in light of the census held shortly after, in April 1881. This was the first simultaneous census of the British Empire and of the six Australian colonies; it counted the continent's population as just over two and a quarter million people, less than the population of the London county of Middlesex.²⁰ The sentiment of Badham's motto, taken to represent New South Wales, fitted the rapid advances made by the oldest of the Australian colonies. New South Wales was a wealth-producing community: its export of wool and gold alone were worth £6 million for a population of about 600,000.²¹ Never mind the fact that distinction as the most populous colony went to Victoria, formerly a part of New South Wales.²²

Impact of the Exhibition

In 1879, the Great Exhibition gave an impression of progress in Sydney. The steam tramway which opened that September, running from Hunter Street to Redfern, reinforced that impression. Further advances were to follow. Just four years after Alexander Graham Bell took out patents for his invention, the first telephone line was installed in Sydney, from the Wool Exchange to the Darling Harbour woolsheds. Two years later, in 1881, Farmer's department store would install the city's first passenger lift using the Otis principle of a suspending cable.

Sydneysiders measured the achievements of their rapidly growing city against progress elsewhere. At the Exhibition, crowds gathered near the British Pavilion to ogle at the 8-foot-long model of the Inman Shipping Line's *City of Berlin*, the largest passenger steamer then afloat. It had crossed the Atlantic in record-breaking time, taking only seven and a half days to reach New York from Liverpool.

Motion was the order of the day, seen as a 'veritable universal power' that ruled over everything. Forty-nine-year-old civil engineer Gother Mann, designer of brass mortar and ordnance projectiles and then planning Sydney Harbour's defences, applauded this faith in speed. To him, the 'athletic action' of motion was symbolic of force of mind. The reverse was indolence, which was a curse because progressive worldly deeds were only achievable with the power that motion brought to new methods. And he was far from alone in praising the virtues of such dynamism. 'Electric action' had gone into erecting the towering

Garden Palace: the building had gone up with remarkable speed, in less than eight months, thanks to building crews working at night under electric light.

Electricity and other new, progressive technologies were to be used fully for humanity to soar and tower. Likening humanity's mastery of motion to natural forces, Gother Mann wrote,

... Motion's inherent mystery,
Depicted in our history,
Is man's expanding knowledge, – all
Foreshadowing his final goal.
Thus Motion, infinite, sublime!
Pervading Mortals, Matter, Time,
Creation's pow'r, Destruction's force,
Has Bliss or Misery in its course.²³

Mitchell agreed that all this local progress was impressive, but he was also conscious of grim realities that could not be ignored. Colonial prosperity had not removed the darker side to living, which the colonists could not dismiss in their race to material wealth. A doctor's son, he was mindful of warnings about the impurities from the wharves, factories and other accessories of Sydney's busy and crowded life. Just before the International Exhibition opened, he heard the members of the Royal Society of New South Wales being warned about the urgent need to improve sanitation. Citizens needed forcible reminders that they had yet to solve 'the pressing though unheroic problem of keeping their surroundings pure and wholesome'.²⁴ Behind this warning, Mitchell noted the often-sung hymn reminding that 'death rides on every passing breeze'.²⁵ Not long after, he would be only too painfully reminded of this when his cousin Augusta Scott, fondly known as 'Gussie', aged only thirty-three, died from typhoid fever, leaving her husband of four years and their two-year-old son.

Unemployment was problematic too, so by 1884 the Government would institute public work schemes and set up soup kitchens.²⁶ The restiveness that accompanied unemployment was of concern.

Larrikinism – 'pushes' of district street gangs, disdainful of authority and engaged in crime – was a social pest. The celebrated Scottish tenor David Kennedy, who toured Australia twice to bring his native ballads to Scotch expatriates, was appalled. As he described the problem, a larrikin was 'a wild youth, a creature bred by the absence of parental control – a lower-class youth,

but not necessarily very poor, very wretched, or very young'.²⁷ In gangs of twenty and thirty, the larrikins 'break street lamps, wrench off knockers, tear down fences, mob and maltreat policemen, hustle respectable people at noon-day, and at night assault some sober citizen and rob him'. An Australian observer expressed the problem more bluntly:

Vandals who hunt like wolves for victims in a pack
All unprovok'd a lonely wretch attack
And maim for life or nearly stone him dead.²⁸

Not a week passed without some larrikin incident.

For Sydney-born Mitchell, these disparities tempered both the pride expressed in Badham's motto and the hyperbole from Parkes. Growth in New South Wales had been chaotic for the past twenty or so years. Since the discovery of gold in 1851, new arrivals into the colony had tripled the population. Mitchell was born into an earlier community of colonists (many of them Scottish) who developed institutions in the colony before this influx of later (and many Irish) arrivals reached it, intent on their own success. He felt keenly the changes in values that had occurred. He also believed that colonial achievement rested on more than material wealth. Besides, while the prosperity of New South Wales made it famous, fortune was not kind to those who fell behind in the rush to be rich. An observant and thoughtful man, Mitchell recognised that the inequality which came with prosperity was a troublesome issue.

Mitchell was influenced by a widely read book which addressed the mismatch between the 'grandeur of the civilization that is possible [and] barbarism of the civilization that is'.²⁹ American political economist Henry George drew attention in another of his books, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), to the issue of inequality in the distribution of wealth. Although looking at the Irish land question and reflecting on the American experience, the questions George raised were pertinent to Australian problems. He warned of the ferment existing throughout the civilised world due to disparities in wealth. He argued that new, progressive technologies (like steam and electricity) impelled fundamental social changes.

Mitchell witnessed for himself the developments about which George wrote. As a town-dweller, whose income largely came from tenants leasing rural land that he owned in the Hunter region, northwest of Sydney, Mitchell knew that prosperity was not uniformly enjoyed across the country. To him, progressive advances further highlighted inequality. For example, statistics revealed the

problem of crime across populations – particularly in the seemingly undisturbed countryside. 'In the case of New South Wales', wrote one observer, 'why, go read some of the confidential reports of school inspectors concerning the state of society in the country districts of this colony, and though you may be conversant with the vilest quarters in Sydney, I dare swear your hair will stand on end'.³⁰ Mitchell and his extended family were closely acquainted with these problems. His uncle, David Scott, served as police magistrate at Sydney's Central Police Court for nearly twenty-five years. Scott's brother, Helenus, served similarly elsewhere, as did his son. Following his father's footsteps, George Scott (Gussie's brother), was then serving as police magistrate in Tumut, in the foothills of the mountains 260 miles southwest of Sydney.³¹ They well knew that the life of the Australian bushman was the dreariest drama known. It was 'wild in its madness as the wildest Walpurgis festival, grim in its horror-time as the Medieval Dance of Death, culminating in a desolation of utter and hopeless despair'.³²

From Sydney, Mitchell understood clearly why Parkes spoke of the need to improve conditions. His friend, the writer Emily Heron – never shy of expressing her opinion – wrote about the dwellings of want and pain that could be seen beyond the city's broader thoroughfare:

Here the drunken father will cruelly beat
A slatternly red-eyed wife,
While hunger is known and squalor is found,
And sickness and fever are rife.³³

Mitchell agreed with Parkes who said, when contemplating the progress of human affairs, that 'our boasted civilization is only of value in the proportion to which it improves and elevates the condition of the great part of the human family who live by their own labour'.³⁴ Owing to the restiveness which Mitchell observed around him, he thought it was time for Parkes (frequently in financial difficulty himself) to honour his pledge 'to enact such measures as will be most beneficial to the great body of the working people of this country'.

Necessary improvements and reforms had been stalled for some time by political deadlock. Heated debate over land reform was ignited by the controversial free-trader and Opposition leader John Robertson, a Hunter region pastoralist. Known as the 'Knight of Clovelly', Robertson's fiery reddish-brown hair matched his hot dislike for Parkes. Owing to the impasse between them, pressing legislation was neglected for more than a decade. Legislative deadlock

ended when Robertson retired from the parliamentary arena. Mitchell followed the standstill closely. The inability to undertake imperative reform was, as Parkes put it, discreditable to the public colonial mind.³⁵ The *Singleton Argus* referred to the pressing need for reform more strongly: ‘There is at last a fair prospect of bringing the political affairs of the country once more into their proper channel. For years past it cannot be denied that they have been, so to say, running wild.’³⁶

Politicians aside, working men themselves were divided now that the colony was no longer a ‘working-man’s paradise’. Henry Kendall shared this view. Losing a secure income when he resigned in 1869 from the position that Henry Halloran had found him in the Colonial Secretary’s office, Kendall became an occasional political skit writer. He would soon sarcastically present protectionist politician Ninian Melville as a typical example of endemic political rot. A convict’s son, Melville would be elected in April 1880 to represent the mining districts of Newcastle, where Mitchell’s family had strong ties. A well-known metropolitan political agitator and stump orator, Melville won the confidence of Newcastle’s coalminers after living among them for six months. Elsewhere, Melville’s nomination was resented; with public opinion against Melville, Kendall wrote:

Some who bray at Wallsend
Sent Thing we know to be a windbag bouncing into Parliament!³⁷

Mitchell owned a rare published copy of Kendall’s poem, *The Song of Ninian Melville*, in which Kendall lambasted Melville as a ‘noisy Ninny’. Copies were withdrawn from sale just after being released when Melville threatened to sue Kendall’s publisher for libel. Kendall delighted in Melville’s being a Newtown undertaker who prepared bodies for burial when chairing the Working Men’s Defence Association and promoting himself as a radical voice of the ‘Working Man’.³⁸

In the eyes of the sparely built, patriotic poet, Parliament lacked eminent men who put public interest ahead of their own. As in his cantata, Kendall looked back to a past time:

House with high, august traditions – Chamber where the voice of
Lowe,
And the lordly words of Wentworth sounded thirty years ago –
Halls familiar to our fathers, where, in days exalted, rang

All the tones of all the feeling which ennobled Bland and Lang –
We in ashes – we in sackcloth, sorrow for the insult cast
By a crowd of bitter boobies on the grandeur of your past!
Take again your penny whistle – boy, it is no good to me:
Last invention is a bladder with the title of M.P.!

Politicians serving their own interest deserved little respect, unlike the worthy figures praised by Kendall.

Lowe, Wentworth, Bland and Lang – all were early Australian democrats whom Mitchell’s family had known. And, as an avid reader of literature, Mitchell’s imagination often fixed on earlier times. In 1879, the quickly evolving colony was more attuned to growth than tradition. Colonists then showed a less exalted sense of purpose than Mitchell recalled had been demonstrated thirty years before. He felt the loss to which Kendall alluded because leadership without fanfare and self-interest was what Mitchell’s family saw as duty.

There was no doubt that many Sydneysiders were future-looking and could see only bright prospects ahead. Most were uncritical in their optimism. As Mitchell’s friend William Yarrington had written poetically, their minds were focused on the future and blind to the past and present.³⁹ They overlooked the reality that colonial growth had been uneven. ‘With our parks and public reserves’, said one Sydney futurist, ‘our splendid gardens, our well-kept and well-lighted streets, our pushing business men and wonderful facilities for commerce, Sydney will yet outdistance some of the marvellous American cities’.⁴⁰ The talk of federating the Australian colonies encouraged this confidence.

In hindsight, Mitchell agreed that the launch of the International Exhibition was an important milestone for the colony. Like Kendall, he was concerned that underlying values be maintained. To his mind, the Exhibition did more than symbolise that the Australasian colonies (New South Wales in particular) now belonged among the society of nations. It showed that wider community interests were overcoming narrower self-interest.

He saw this demonstrated opposite the Exhibition grounds. In Macquarie Street there stood the Free Public Library, where the commissioners for the Exhibition met. When the Free Library began as a private subscription library in 1826, it was the first in the colonies. Mitchell’s father had been a founding member. He steered the affairs of that library for many years until his death in 1869. Shortly afterwards, the Robertson Ministry bought the library, renamed it, and opened it to the public in late September 1869.

Now a reference library of 37,000 volumes, it also boasted a separate new Lending Branch with almost 6,000 volumes.⁴¹ Within just over a decade of opening as Sydney's Free Public Library, it admitted over a million readers.⁴² Its popularity, however, made it overcrowded and many books were fast wearing out from constant use.⁴³

Critics regarded the Free Library as being only a temporary substitute for a proper library.⁴⁴ A more pleasant reading room was found in Sydney's Mechanics' School of Arts, although this was a subscription library with only 19,000 volumes. Sydney could not offer anything like the twenty-five-year-old Melbourne Public Library (with more than 80,000 volumes). In 1881, it would also be noted that public libraries in the United States held over twelve million books.

Charles Badham was the first president of the trustees for the Free Public Library. His dignified clerical appearance belied his democratic views.⁴⁵ While renowned as a Greek scholar, he shared the belief of the day in the power of useful knowledge. A wide-ranging educator, he considered that it was necessary to expand the Library to 'prepare for the rapid development of progressive New South Wales'.⁴⁶ Colonial Architect, James Barnet, was asked to sketch designs reminiscent of the British Museum, for a new library building proposed to replace barracks that formerly housed convicts near Hyde Park. This expansionary ambition represented a new collective spirit.

To Mitchell, it was clear that pride in the International Exhibition sharpened awareness of a common culture in the country. Encouragingly, it was thought important to develop in the rising generation 'a love for all that is good and pure and lovable in our human nature', and to nurture 'those qualities which go to form a high national character'.⁴⁷ As a result, from 1880, Australian history would be prescribed under an Act of Parliament as a subject to be offered in all government elementary schools in New South Wales. The Exhibition also raised interest in the formation of cultural institutions, like a Technological Museum for Sydney and the (later Royal) Art Society of New South Wales. These were founded with plans to open in the Garden Palace when the Exhibition closed in April 1880. This was important because without such cultural bodies (like a proper library or art gallery), artistic achievement, in which Mitchell took special interest, could only be imagined, 'like the fair scenes in foreign lands'.⁴⁸ The Great Exhibition stirred a sense of community and of common purpose in the people of New South Wales, with their sights set on a promising future.