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The Weatherman from Greenwich

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Abstract

A new book, *The Weatherman from Greenwich: Charles Todd 1826 to 1910*, promises to be a biography of Charles Todd, telecommunications pioneer in Australia. The title is, however, misleading. Most of the book is devoted to social influences in England and South Australia that may have shaped Todds early life. Todds early technical experience in England and his first activities in Australia are briefly sketched. Readers seeking a fuller account of Todds life and achievements should look elsewhere.

Introduction

A new biography of Charles Todd, one of the founding fathers of telecommunications in Australia, should spark interest in the readers of this *Journal*. This book, *The Weatherman from Greenwich: Charles Todd 1826 to 1910*, by Tony Rogers and Judy Ferrante (Rogers, 2017 ^[5]) carries the subsidiary title on its cover: Meteorologist, Telegrapher, Electrician, Postmaster-General, Astronomer, South Australian. It thus promises to be a full picture of the man and his achievements. Alas, it falls far short of this promise. Those who seek a more complete biography of Todd should look elsewhere.

It would be fairer to say that this is a book about the times in which Charles Todd spent his early life. In the first chapters, we are given some background information on Regency and early Victorian England and introduced to Charles Todd as he is employed by the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Soon, however, Todd disappears from the narrative as we are given long descriptions of early Adelaide. Finally, he reappears in the last chapter as he starts to make his technological contributions to Australia.

Early Adelaide

The authors devote much of the book four chapters out of nine and about half the pages to describing Adelaide in its early days, before the Todds arrive. They make much of the disorganization and misrepresentation of the South Australian Company (the founding institution) and the early colony. For this description, the authors are perhaps overly dependent on the work of Henry Hussey, an early immigrant who left several accounts of his life and times. They also seem to take particular exception to George Fife Angas, a major figure in the founding and promotion of the colony. Surely he was no better or worse than many a Regency businessman.

The authors also take a rather prurient interest in the seamier side of Adelaide life, devoting most of a chapter to sexual scandals and evidence before the magistrates of brothels and sly-grog shops. While this is colourful, it seems to have little to do with Todd. Are the authors hinting at some such episode in Charles Todds life We are not told. Indeed, the evidence is rather that Todd was devoted to his wife, Alice (after whom he named Alice Springs).

While all this is diverting for the reader, especially for South Australians, it is only glancingly relevant to Todd. As the authors themselves say, the colony was set on a new path after the commencement of copper mining and the end of the first gold rushes in Victoria in the late 1840s. By the time the Todds arrived in late 1855, almost 20 years after the colonys foundation, Adelaide and its environs were well on the way to being the prosperous and well-ordered place we all know today.

Charles Todd and his achievements

So, what do we learn of Charles Todd and his early achievements We learn of his first employment at the Greenwich Observatory and his relationship with the Astronomer Royal, George Airy. We learn of his outposting to the Cambridge Observatory (where he met his future wife) and his introduction to the electric telegraph, which ran between the two establishments.

Todd returned to Greenwich in 1854 to head the Galvanic Department, which looked after the telegraph lines and their power supply (batteries). Although he was not in the post long, he gained valuable experience in maintaining a telegraph system when he worked on fixing the automated time-keeping system at Deal on the Kent coast, kept synchronized to Greenwich by a telegraph line of about 150 km. (Part of the problem was a weak wire at Tonbridge.)

When Todd arrived in Adelaide, he brought with him material for building a telegraph line between Adelaide and its port, a distance of about 14 km. He had the line working within a few months. In fact, it turned out that he had sufficient material also to build a later line to Gawler, a further 40 km. The controversy about the expense of Todds early activities and the competition with a commercial line, which was already operating to Port Adelaide, is briefly described in the book.

The book ends with an account of Todds visit in 1856 to Sam McGowan, roughly his opposite number in Melbourne. Together, the two men promoted the idea of electric telegraphs between the colonies, first between Adelaide and Melbourne and later between Melbourne and Sydney. This was the beginning of the activity that led to the inclusion of telegraphy and telephony within the Postmaster Generals Department at Australian federation.

Strangely for a book published by the Australian Meteorological Society, we are told little of Todds activities regarding the weather and weather forecasting. These were of great importance to South Australia and other colonies in the time leading up to Federation. We are told that Todd checked the calibration of temperatures then recorded in Adelaide no problems were found. We are also told that Todd, like others, believed that the telegraph could be used to collect weather data from a wide area and hence assist in prediction. But there is not a hint of Todds great legacy, the weather records and synoptic charts kept meticulously from 1879, now considered one of the gems of Australian colonial science.

Conclusion

Charles Todd was a great pioneer in the establishment of the electric telegraph and weather records, and, importantly, in the management of both, in Australia. His life and achievements should be widely known and celebrated.

The present book is a footnote to Todds life. It gives some background, often diverting, about the influences and attitudes that would have, or could have, shaped Todds early experiences, but it largely misses the mark about Todd himself. For a true understanding of Todd, the reader should look elsewhere.

Reference

Rogers, Tony & Ferrante, Judy. 2017. *The Weatherman from Greenwich: Charles Todd 1826 to 1910*, Adelaide: Australian Meteorological Association.

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