

## Wakefield, Edward Gibbon (1796–1862)

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Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796–1862), author and colonial promoter, was born on 20 March 1796 in London, the second of nine children of Edward Wakefield and Susanna, née Crash. Like his younger brothers, Daniel, Arthur and William, he later went to New Zealand, but the youngest, Felix, was the only member of the family to go to Australia.

Gibbon was educated at Westminster school and Edinburgh High School. Although admitted to Gray's Inn in October 1813 he became secretary to the British envoy at Turin in 1814. He returned briefly to London and in June 1816 eloped with Eliza Ann Frances Pattle, a ward in Chancery. Through the lord chancellor the marriage was approved by parliament and Wakefield returned with Eliza to another appointment at the Turin legation. Susan Priscilla (Nina) was born on 4 December 1817 and Edward Jerningham ten days before Eliza died on 5 July 1820. From this marriage Wakefield derived a substantial life income. Evidently it was not sufficient to sustain his ambitions, for he abducted a 15-year-old heiress, Ellen Turner, from her school in March 1826. They were married at Gretna Green and fled to Calais, pursued by enraged members and friends of the girl's family. She was induced to return to her parents and Wakefield returned to England for trial. He and his brother William, an accomplice, were convicted of a statutory misdemeanour and on 14 May 1827 were each sentenced to three years imprisonment. The marriage was annulled by parliament in spite of a counter-petition by Wakefield.

Wakefield's imprisonment in Newgate was to transform his whole career. His disgrace led to his critical study of emigration and to his remedy, systematic colonization. Soon after his entry to Newgate, Wakefield occupied himself by inquiring why the prisoners were there, effective were their punishments and what were their prospects. This and other material he brought before the public, chiefly in *Facts relating to the Punishment of Death in the Metropolis* (1831), but also *Swing Unmasked, or the Causes of Rural Incendiarism* (1831), *The Hangman and the Judge* (1833) and *Popular Politics* (1837). His study of emigration aroused his interest in Australasia and his anonymous *Sketch of a Proposal for Colonizing Australasia* was printed in June 1829. It was reprinted with other articles in the *Morning Chronicle* from 21 August to 6 October and in *A Letter from Sydney, the Principal Town of Australasia*, which was published in December with the name of Robert Gouger as editor. The *Letter* caused some stir in Sydney, for Wakefield claimed that Australian colonies were suffering from chaotic granting of free land, shortage of labour and consequent dependence on convicts. He argued that if settlement were concentrated, waste lands of the crown could be readily sold and the proceeds applied to the emigration of labourers, preferably young married couples, thereby giving maximum population relief in Britain and ensuring a balanced, fruitful colonial society. But if the price for crown land were made 'sufficient' (high enough to discourage labourers from immediately acquiring land they could not use) such tribulations as those of Thomas Peel at the Swan River settlement would be avoided. Sufficiency of labour and a congenial society would attract capital, encourage emigration, assure prosperity, and justify the rights of a colony to elect representatives to its own legislature. British society and civilization could thus be transplanted from an old to a new country for their mutual benefit.

Wakefield advocated his theory of systematic colonization, infallible and self-regulating, with every available mode of persuasion. Chief among these was his personal magnetism; his manner, gesture and speech, which he projected at meetings, at table, before parliamentary committees, even to passers-by and casual acquaintances. Although a poor speaker in public he was most persuasive at his own fireside and in his writings. He pressed his cause in a constant spate of letters, newspapers, pamphlets and books, in prose as insistent as it was terse. Wakefield was also an inveterate maker of societies, especially those which, in his own words, having a public object, 'meet, appoint a chairman and secretary; pass resolutions and subscribe money; in other words they set to work for themselves, instead of seeing what their government may do for them'. What were the obstacles to his cause? The public cared nothing for colonies nor did the government except as a dumping ground for criminals. Those who saw population as superabundant argued that there was no surplus capital for export. Religious and missionary bodies were jealous of their native charges and feared the influx of white colonists. By contrast, those who saw colonization as a panacea for the condition of England wanted to propound their own schemes: Wilmot Horton by pauper emigration and Robert Torrens by promising emigrant capitalists all their needs from a slender land fund. At the Colonial Office Wakefield faced the unwillingness of an understaffed instrument of state to add to its administrative and financial burdens, exacerbated by that natural inertia which welled from the repeated rejection of unwelcome petitions. Finally, and increasingly with time, he faced former disciples disgruntled by his exacting demands and even the minor details of his views. Wakefield was a passionate man and could inspire only allegiance or enmity, never neutrality.

Wakefield's propaganda recognizably influenced the issue of several new regulations for the disposal of waste land in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, especially those that related sale by auction at a minimum price of 5s. an acre, with the proceeds devoted to an immigration fund. Wakefield was unimpressed by such a token salute to his scheme and began to plan the systematic colonization of southern Australia.

Wakefield's role in the founding of South Australia is difficult to estimate. Torrens later credited him with the major role and so did Governor Sir John Hindmarsh. Robert Gouger and Anthony Bacon who submitted the first South Australian proposals were both associates of Wakefield from his prison days. His biographer, Richard Garnett, hinted that Wakefield intended to go to South Australia in 1832, but that year the first plans for the proposed colony were rejected by the Colonial Office. To explain and elaborate his theories Wakefield anonymously published *England and America. A Comparison of the Social and Political State of Both Nations*, 2 vols (London, 1833; New York, 1834). Meanwhile another scheme put forward by the South Australian Land Co. had proved abortive. In these years Wakefield spent much time on the Continent. He was absent when the South Australian Association was formed late in 1833, but returned next year to help his brother Daniel to draft the bill to empower His Majesty to erect South Australia into a British province or provinces and to provide for the colonization and government thereof. Wakefield was active in organizing the lobbying that led to parliament passing the bill. After it received royal assent on 15 August 1834, he published *The New British Province of South Australia* (London, 1834; Edinburgh, 1835), a manual of advice and information for intending colonists. Apart from these contributions Wakefield's name appears rarely in contemporary manuscripts, though his personal influence must have been very great. In January 1835 he took his consumptive daughter to Lisbon, where she died on 12 February. Grief-stricken he returned to London to find that Torrens had been made chairman of the South Australian Colonization Commission appointed by the government. Wakefield's interest in the new province was already on the wane, chiefly because he was disgusted by the low price of land fixed in his absence and the misleading 'self-supporting principle' adopted by Torrens.

In June 1836 Wakefield gave evidence before the select committee on the disposal of land in the British colonies and in December offered himself as a parliamentary candidate for Birmingham but soon withdrew. In 1838 he became a director of the Western Australian Co.; its plans for a settlement, Australind, at Port Leschenault, were not carried out with marked success. Wakefield also spent six months with Lord Durham in Canada and his influence appears markedly in Durham's *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, in its strong recommendation for local self-government in British colonies and in the appendices on public land and emigration. In 1841 Wakefield returned to Canada as agent for his North American Colonial Association, planning to carry out public works with Irish labourers on the security of the colony's land revenues. In December 1842 he was elected to the Canadian General Assembly, and despite an uncertain reception proved a valuable adviser to three successive Canadian governors.

Meanwhile Wakefield's eyes had turned again to the antipodes. In May 1837 the New Zealand Association was formed at his home. A number of intending emigrants were assembled by 1838 but the bill for colonizing the islands was defeated in the House of Commons by missionary interests. Wakefield returned from Canada in 1838 to find that the New Zealand Association had formed the New Zealand Land Co. and that their second bill had been rejected. Undeterred, Wakefield plumped for defiance and in May 1839 dispatched the first shipload of colonists. A British consul had already been appointed and favourable reception at the House of Lords select committee on New Zealand emboldened him to have the company apply for a charter, which was granted in 1841. It was the news of the death of his brother, Arthur (1799–1843), in a conflict with Maoris that brought Wakefield back from Canada in 1844. New Zealand affairs were the company was nearly bankrupt and many of its titles were in dispute. In April Wakefield worked zealously to win a favourable report from a House of Commons select committee enquiring into New Zealand affairs. Still ignored by the Colonial Office, he then came to the view that while colonists had no control of their own land policy their title to land was a decisive step, for previously an essential article of his faith was that disposal of lands and emigration should be an imperial matter and not subject to local legislation. In 1846 when Earl Grey took charge at the Colonial Office. Grey had often shown interest in the Wakefield system but was now violently opposed to Wakefield's system.



Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796–1862), by Benjamin Holl, 1826

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government for New Zealand. On 15 August Wakefield, already worn out, suffered a severe stroke from which he never fully recovered. Thenceforth he was obliged to avoid excitement and to retire from London, having only his pen and the penny post to execute his plans unless some man of note could be inveigled to his cottage.

Grey's decision to press for the passing of his Australian colonies government bill in the 1850 session diverted Wakefield from his plans for New Zealand's self-government. Hoping to stir up agitation so that he might match the bill with an opposition measure to include New Zealand with Australia, he organized the Society for the Reform of Colonial Government. Much in the spirit of the 1848 revolutionary upheaval he published *The Southern Colonies: Their Municipal Annexation, or Their National Independence* (London, 1849), in which he exhorted colonists at the Cape, Australia and New Zealand to act vigorously in favour of the colonial reformers' bill. To introduce it he secured Sir William Molesworth, an associate of long standing. But Molesworth's proposal to grant the colonists power to make their own constitutions proved anathema to the Tory members of the society and it broke up on this issue. Wakefield lost interest in the project.

In February 1849 his *A View of the Art of Colonization* had been published in London, with the object of planting a Church of England colony in New Zealand and thereby disarming missionary opposition. The Association for Founding the Settlement of Canterbury had been formed in March 1848, and in July its surveyor left England with instructions to select and prepare a site for the new colony. The first emigrant ships left England in 1850 for Canterbury. In 1851 Wakefield sent as his agent his youngest brother, Felix (1807-1875), who had been a surveyor in Van Diemen's Land in 1832-47. After a Provincial Council was provided for Canterbury by the New Zealand Constitution Act of 1852 Wakefield himself turned colonist. He arrived at Christchurch in February 1853 and after a short stay moved to Wellington. He was elected to the first New Zealand General Assembly but his influence over the acting governor earned him much unpopularity and led to a fracas which broke Wakefield's health. He lived in retirement at his home in Wellington and his death on 16 May 1862 went almost unnoticed.

Wakefield was an enigma to his contemporaries as he is to posterity. Denied office by his criminal record he devoted his energy to schemes for systematic colonization and responsible government. Not content only to influence men's minds by his pen he sought directly to influence their actions as well. His personal magnetism and imaginative zeal won him many converts but much disappointment when he found that people could not be controlled like puppets. His idealism would not allow him to compromise, and when he ignored the principles of others their reactions were often bitter. In his restless search to achieve his objectives he ranged through the whole spectrum of English politics and society, utilitarian radicals, Whigs, and High Church Tories, and left behind him some claim to success in penal reform, immigration to New South Wales, the Durham report, and the colonization of South Australia and New Zealand. The factious conclusion to his career and his obscure death have given to his life a certain tragic perspective although some writers have credited him with high rank as an architect of the British Commonwealth.

A bust by Joseph Durham, R.A., was placed in the Colonial Office in 1876 and transferred in 1934 to the National Gallery of South Australia; a miniature by an unknown artist is in the National Portrait Gallery, London, and a portrait by E. J. Collins and R. Ansdell in the Provincial Hall, Christchurch, New Zealand.

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