



## Philip Steer, "On Systematic Colonization and the Culture of Settler Colonialism: Edward Gibbon Wakefield's *A Letter from Sydney* (1829)"

1837

Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796-1862) was in Newgate Prison in 1829, nearing the end of his three-year sentence for the sensational and bizarre abduction of the underage heiress Ellen Turner, when he began to publish a series of letters in the *Morning Chronicle* purporting to be from a frustrated member of the gentry now living in Australia.[1] Soon revised, collected, and republished, *Wakefield's A Letter from Sydney: The Principal Town of Australasia* (1829) offered a manifesto for a new approach to settler colonialism that would spur the early Victorian renewal of British imperial expansion in Australia and New Zealand. If Wakefield's name is now largely unknown within Victorian studies, that reflects not only the contested status of his actions and character during his lifetime, but also the ambivalent position of settler colonialism within current literary, cultural, and historical scholarship. During the first half of the twentieth century, historians and biographers held up Wakefield as an archetypal great man of Empire, even as they consistently sought to rescue him from obscurity and/or opprobrium. In Wakefield's earliest biography—published as part of the "Builders of Greater Britain" series, alongside Sir Walter Raleigh and Rajah Brooke—R. Garnet concludes by imagining an epitaph that might one day be erected in his honor in the colonies:

The man in these latter days beyond comparison of the most genius and the widest influence in the great science of colonization, both as a thinker, a writer, and a worker; whose name is like a spell to all interested in the subject. (375)

In Richard Charles Mills' account, almost two decades later, Wakefield's bureaucratic achievements are likened to the bravery and derring-do of a hero of imperial romance—"Wakefield had first to convince a small band of followers, then to lay siege to the Colonial Office. . . . [I]t was only by his persistence, ingenuity, and great power of personal persuasion that he was enabled to carry on the campaign" (325)—while Paul Bloomfield's study from the early 1960s offers Wakefield's achievements as a patriotic counterblast to Britain's desire to enter the European Economic Community: "This strange, far-sighted man of enormous mental and physical energies—the author of much splendidly vivid modern prose—was the founder of an Empire and builder of the Commonwealth" (x). By this point, however, the historiographic tide had begun to turn. Michael Turnbull's slim volume, *The New Zealand Bubble: The Wakefield Theory in Practice* (1959), made a forceful case that, at its heart, Wakefield's entire interest in the colonization of New Zealand "had to encourage speculation" (17, original emphasis), and concluded simply, "Wakefield had some merit as a thinker and he was a publicist of genius. As a practical coloniser he was a menace" (36). His most recent biographer, Philip Temple, asserts acerbically, "In the political and social climate of the early twenty-first century, Edward Gibbon Wakefield and his family are the villains of all fashionable postcolonial scenarios of the past" (1). Wakefield's place within Victorian studies is currently limited to a bit-part role in the development of political economy; in Australian historiography, he occupies a similarly peripheral place as the England-based progenitor of South Australian colonization; in New Zealand, by contrast, the lasting cultural and political impact of Wakefield's New Zealand Company settlements, and their adoption by later settlers as a "myth of origin," have ensured that Wakefield and his legacies remain both more prominent and more fraught (Belich 279).

Standing at the head of several decades of publications, political advocacy, and private colonization schemes—efforts that emanated in Britain and extended to the furthest parts of the globe—Wakefield's rhetorical flight in *A Letter from Sydney* would have incalculable impacts on the indigenous populations and ecologies of Australia and New Zealand, "liberating future inhabitants from any sense of place in which native or indigenous things matter" (Park 37). In 1829, there were almost 62,000 British subjects in Australia, and in 1840, around 1,000 in New Zealand; by the turn of the century, Australia's settler population would number some 3,750,000, and New Zealand's about 770,000. By contrast, the Indigenous population of Australia would plummet from an estimated pre-contact level of over 300,000 to perhaps only 94,500 by 1900; in New Zealand during the same period, the Māori population would be reduced from an estimated 100,000 to only 45,500 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Statistics New Zealand). The vast global redistribution of the British population inaugurated by

3rd

