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The Rev John West

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### THE REVEREND JOHN WEST

THE RECENT Loan to the Art Gallery by Mr H.A. Nichols, of ~~Devenport~~  
 Ulverstone, of a portrait in oils of the Reverend John West <sup>Painted by his friend John Glover</sup> has promp-  
 ted the compilation of the following notes on the career of a man, who,  
 in his day, played a very prominent part in the life of this community.  
 It is difficult for us now to appreciate the intensity  
 of the agitation that convulsed Tasmania from 1830 onwards, in regard  
 to the continuance, or otherwise, of the system of transportation-an  
 agitation that reached its climax in the decade between 1840 and 1850.  
 Ever since 1817, when the immigration to this island of free colonists  
 may be said to have <sup>started</sup> ~~began~~, there had been ~~growing~~ <sup>growing</sup> up an increasing  
 conflict between the partisans of the divergent policies of convict-  
 ism and colonisation. Prior to 1824 these two policies had developed  
 side by side, in a more or less haphazard fashion, the British Govern-  
 ment regarding <sup>Van Diemen's Land</sup> ~~Tasmania~~ as primarily a penal colony, with a benevolent  
 encouragement of free settlement as a side-line, in order to provide  
 employers for the large number of convicts, who otherwise would have  
 been a considerable burden on the Imperial Treasury. In 1824 arrived  
 Colonel George Arthur as Lt Governor, with definite instructions to  
 tighten up the <sup>penal</sup> ~~penal~~ system, and a fixed determination to subordinate  
 to it all other considerations. For twelve years Arthur devoted his  
 whole energies to the fulfilment of his mission, but, though he suc-  
 ceeded, for the time being, in imposing his will upon the people, he  
 failed-as others had done before him-to realise that you cannot stem  
 the tide of progress by sitting in a chair and dictating orders to the  
 oncoming waves. ~~After some years of work in that ministry~~  
 While a great number of colonists-especially the large landowners in  
 the country-favored the continuance of the status quo, which, with its  
 supply of slave labour, undoubtedly helped in the development of their

holdings-there had arisen a considerable body of residents who felt that the welfare of the community and its progress towards free institutions, as well as the moral and social well-being of its citizens, were being gravely retarded by the influx of so many thousands of the criminals of the Homeland. This movement was accelerated and strengthened by the humanitarian ideals that were spreading in England itself at that time.

In 1840 New South Wales barred her doors to the further reception of convicts, who were thereby diverted to Van Diemen's Land, which found <sup>her</sup> itself in danger of being swamped and <sup>her</sup> its very existence as a free community threatened by the ever-increasing flood of felons.

By that time Arthur had gone, and the walls of the edifice erected by him were already showing signs of crumbling. The opponents of his system realised that the time had come to gather their forces, and to make a determined effort to compel the Home Government to accede to their demands. The one thing needed was a leader, to organise the movement, and to knit together the scattered elements of the party.

Where was he to be found? It was at this <sup>time</sup> crisis that there arrived, quite unobtrusively, a young, unknown Congregational Minister, called John West.

West was born in England in 1809-six years before the Battle of Waterloo. <sup>we know nothing</sup> Little is known of his parentage or early years, except that when he grew to manhood he devoted himself to the service of the Church, and, after the necessary studies, was ordained a Minister of the Congregational Denomination. After some years of work in that ministry he placed himself at the disposal of the Colonial Missionary Society, and at the age of thirty was sent out to Van Diemen's Land, then sadly in need of missionary enterprise.

He arrived on the Barque "Emu" on 17th March 1840, with his wife and young daughter, and immediately entered upon his ministry in the north. For a time services were conducted in a small wooden building in Frederick Street, Launceston, but this was soon found to be inadequate, and a larger chapel, called "Milton Hall", was erected in St John Square, and opened in 1842. Here he officiated for twelve years. During that time he became a prominent and popular figure, active in every movement that made for the progress of the city. He was one of the founders of the Mechanics Institute and of the Benevolent Society. He established a reputation as a powerful preacher and public speaker, and also as a journalist, contributing notable articles to the Launceston Examiner, *which he was largely instrumental in founding, and in these* in which he shewed himself an ardent champion of liberty and free institutions, and an advocate of representative Government. *He also wrote leaders for The Colonial Times, published in Hobart.* From the first he was <sup>by</sup> appalled with the evils of the convict system, and flung himself wholeheartedly into the ranks of those who were clamoring for its abolition. He soon became the leader of the anti-transportation party. Not content with his activities in the island, he visited the mainland, at his own expense, rallied the forces which were gathering there, and finally succeeded in establishing an All-Australia Anti-Transportation League. The formation of this powerful <sup>Association</sup> League sounded the knell of the convict system in Australia. The authorities in England could no longer ignore the writing on the wall, and in 1853 it was officially notified in the Hobart Town Gazette that transportation to Van Diemen's Land had absolutely ceased. . . . Meanwhile, West's visits to the mainland had created a great impression, especially in New South Wales, where his friend and co-religionist

*See also  
H. Butler  
Hobart  
1208*

*See H.*

John Fairfax was proprietor of the Sydney Morning Herald. He had for some time previously been a contributor to the columns of that paper, and Fairfax had on more than one occasion pressed him to accept a position on the staff, but West, unwilling, no doubt, to desert the cause which he had so deeply at heart, had refused. That cause <sup>having</sup> ~~being~~ <sup>triumphed</sup> accomplished, he felt himself free, and when in 1854 the offer was renewed and the Editorial Chair placed at his disposal, he decided to accept the opportunity of a wider sphere for his talents.

His departure from Tasmania was the occasion for a display of the esteem in which he was held, and a proposal, initiated by Mr David Taylor of Winton, to present him with a public testimonial was enthusiastically supported. *He had previously been presented with an address and a piece of commission for his work on the League.* He held the position of Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald for nearly twenty years, dying, literally in harness, on 11th December

1873, at the age of sixty <sup>five</sup> four. Two days after his death the Herald *appeared in mourning garb with* published a glowing eulogy of his character and work, from which I quote the following passage:

"No man ever undertook the duty entrusted to him with a profounder sense of the responsibility of the trust, or a more entire devotion to its fulfilment. His sense of the power of the Press amounted to a passion, and this power he endeavoured to wield wholly for the public good."

Of his personal qualities the writer speaks in the highest terms, praising his modesty, purity of life, simplicity and tender-heartedness-qualities which found expression, not only in his journalistic work, but also in his capacity of founder and president of the Camden College for training men in evangelical work....

To (us, ~~as~~) Tasmanians, he is perhaps best known for his History of Tasmania, published in 1851 by his friend and admirer Henry Dowling, in two volumes, priced at thirty shillings. Those two volumes are now eagerly sought for at ~~anything from £5 to £10.~~ *from five to six times their original price.*

In this History, compiled with immense labour and research during those hectic years of his sojourn in Tasmania, he reveals those characteristics to which I have already alluded. It is written in a flowing style, which tends at times to become rhetorical and Johnsonian. He displays great attention to detail, coupled with a power of generalization and a judicial faculty for assessing and weighing evidence with impartiality. Though coloured <sup>by</sup> to some extent by <sup>his personal bias, especially by</sup> his hatred of oppression in all its forms, the work conveys the impression of sincerity and accuracy, and where necessary his large-hearted tolerance enabled him to put before the reader both sides of any question.

*The History books*  
 It is, without doubt, the most important <sup>summary</sup> yet published of that period of our history *and has earned for him the title of "the first and best historian of Tasmania."*

As might be expected with a man of such vigorous personality, he did not escape criticism. The Cornwall Chronicle, for instance, which, with other newspapers, strongly supported the continuance of transportation, accused him of "having libelled the country for years"... But West was great enough to ignore calumny, and in the passage of time his reputation has grown greater even than it was in his lifetime.

When the day comes to establish a National Portrait Gallery for Tasmania, <sup>it is to be hoped that</sup> the picture now <sup>temporarily</sup> in the possession of the Trustees <sup>may be acquired and given</sup> (should take) an honoured place upon the line.

*His portrait painted by his friend John Glover.*

*from the  
 volume for 1851  
 in 1851.*