

AN IMMIGRANT MECHANIC IN QUEENSLAND, 1865-1866

BY R. H. REECE, B.A.

History Department, University of Queensland

Although a good deal has been written about nineteenth century British immigration to the Australian colonies, the historian is still faced with the problem of translating anonymous statistics into human terms—of setting “Departures” and “Arrivals” in the perspective of the individual’s separation from family, friends and familiar environment, a long and tedious sea voyage and the novelty and challenge of the colonial experience.

The letters written by Francis John Bushby to his parents in 1856-66 and located by Margaret Kiddle in England in 1951¹, help develop this perspective as well as providing interesting material for the historian of labour and industry and of colonial Queensland in an era when news, work and money depended on the English mails.

Bushby’s father, Thomas Bushby, was born in 1812 near Pulboro, Sussex and learnt the trade of wheelwright in his grandfather’s shop. He married in 1841, buying a wheelwright’s business at Ockley, Surrey, with which went the village shop, the Post Office, an orchard and 23 acres of meadow land. Frank was the eldest of a family of five sons and a daughter and was educated at Mr Baxter’s school at Ockley. Having learnt wheelwrighting from his father, Frank went to London in 1862 to try his luck, but trade was dull and he was obliged to learn joinery at Brixton for £1 per week. March 1865 found him unable to obtain employment despite a long and wearying search. It is not surprising that in this predicament he should have been eager to accept a free passage to Queensland sponsored by Peto, Brassey and Betts the railway builders and a guarantee of immediate employment at ten to twelve shillings for an eight hour day.

During 1864 the Queensland Government successfully negotiated loans on the London market enabling it to embark on a lavish public works programme. Contracts for the construction of roads, railways, bridges and waterworks were let and Jordan, the government’s special immigration agent in London, was instructed to send out as free immigrants “. . . all the navvies offered him by the agents of Peto, Brassey and Betts . . .”²

Bushby’s one regret was that since the “Commodore Perry” left London Docks within a week, he would not have time to see his family and his sweetheart Emily, to whom he had already confessed his intention of leaving. This had “put her out very much”,³ but separation was balanced by reflection on the material advantages possessed by single men over married immigrants who were berthed first in “fearful cribs” on the intermediate deck. He and nine others were allocated a 12’ square deck-house which by virtue of its lighting and ventilation was one of the healthiest places on board. In some unfinished doggerel he set out to describe the 23 members of his mess, but rhymes and interest were soon exhausted:—

. . . Mr. Alfred Nash

The Doctor’s assistant
Sirs if you please
In appearance rather common, nothing flash
At all events his disfigured Phiz
Has nearly lost his nose which beauty mocks
But caused by that most foul disease Small Pox
In stature rather tall, in temper rather short
Decidedly unfit for what he’s undertaking.

Of Jalops, Salts, and Senna he's made full many a quack
 Fit for nothing but Colonial Emigration . . .
 The next in point of age is Frances Smyth
 A convalescent consumptive patient
 For years he's been in hospitals despairing of his life
 Till all the Doctors told him emigration
 To Queensland's more favoured Clime
 Might prolong his life sometime . . .
 He injudiciously took too much drink
 Lost his money, caught a cold
 Then Rheumatism [sic] seized hold
 You may guess from inference the sort of man I think
 Moustache and wiskers, style Dundreary,
 With features of an handsome cast
 Sometimes a waiter, many years a valet
 His appearance is suggestive of something rather fast.

After an uneventful voyage of 86 days New South Wales was sighted, but a becalming meant that it was another three weeks before the immigrants were taken up the river by steamer to Brisbane. Finding that the government refuge for single men contained neither bedding nor furniture of any kind, Bushby and most of the others took the cheapest lodgings available—1/- per night and 1/- per meal. They were compelled by the railway company's agents to remain in Brisbane without advance pay until a boat was chartered to take them to Ipswich. From there they travelled as far as the railway had been built and were split up into gangs of eight, Bushby's gang being sent 40 miles further "up country" towards Toowoomba. But the contractor had no work for them and it appears that they were thus relieved of any legal obligation to the railway company which already had a bad name amongst the working men of the colony. Bushby wrote that when work was available, men were ". . . obliged to work for 4/6 per day up country".⁴ Shepherding and farm labouring at 14/- per week with rations did not attract him. Besides, a serious drought meant that rural work was difficult to obtain.

Although he found work in Toowoomba⁵ and considered the possibility of becoming his own master if work continued, he disapproved of a town where twenty public houses served two thousand people with spirits ". . . made up of all kind muck [sic]" since there was no law forbidding adulteration. Nevertheless, a new duty had been imposed by the government on spirits and beer, the latter now being sold at 2/- per bottle. Horse racing was the only alternative entertainment:—

The publicans own all the racers, indeed the publicans and auctioneers take the lead in everything . . . Our member of parliament is an auctioneer and a *twice* convicted ticket of leave man—he was mayor last year.⁶

Land speculation thrived as the railway works approached—land in the main street which had been bought five years previously for £1 per acre was now bringing £1800. Nevertheless this nominal prosperity inflated prices without commensurately improving wages and adding to the amount of work available. Two-roomed "humpies" were rented for 12/- per week and as the drought continued water was sold for 2/- per barrel, butter rose to 3/6 per lb. and shortages of flour occasionally brought bread up to 6/- for a 2 lb. loaf. Mutton and beef never rose above 6d per lb. but most vegetables and fruit, except bananas, were imported from Sydney. When Bushby arrived in Brisbane, cabbages were being sold for 1/- each.



A typical bush hut of the 1860s

Colonial life had its diversions. Bushby remarked on the nonchalance of the shearers passing through Toowoomba for the beginning of the season:—

They roll up two blankets, take a tin pot that will hold a quart which serves them to boil meat or make tea in a half pint tin pot, and a jack knife—is all the equipment for the bush.⁷

Life on the roads was seldom dull. Despite the introduction of Yankee-designed leather springs, the daily Ipswich-Brisbane-Toowoomba coach offered the traveller little comfort, but Bushby's claim that it was often "upset" seems to have been unfounded. Coach accidents were rare, although bushrangers were more common. During the previous six months, the Dalby mailman had been shot and several others robbed.

Bushby's expectations of steady employment were not realised. The demand for skilled labour which had existed in late 1864 and early 1865 had been met and by September he was claiming that since the arrival of the "Commodore Perry" 2500 more immigrants had glutted the labour market. Already there was some agitation against "incessant immigration", especially of Germans who were willing to work "at any price".⁸ There was no more work available on the railways and the long drought reduced the capacity of rural industries to absorb the workforce. Consequently wages fell and employment was difficult to obtain in Toowoomba.

Working class organisation during this period seems to have been restricted to the *Land and Emigration League*.⁹ Although Bushby approved of its aim to discontinue assisted immigration and to throw open the land for agricultural settlement, he does not seem to have taken any part in the organisation. The first eight hour day march had taken place two months before his arrival.

After making unsuccessful inquiries about work available at the pastoral centre of Gayndah, 200 miles north-east of Toowoomba, Bushby returned to Brisbane in October in the hope that more would be offering there now that work had begun on Parliament House and the Government Hospital. But although masons and stonemasons were in demand, carpentering was almost unobtainable and he was forced to accept piece-work wheelmaking. Each week he built two sets of square-tongued 4' 6" wheels which brought him £4, an average of 10/- per 10 hour day. Smiths, body-makers and "wheelers" who had been earning £10 and £6 per week respectively in Victoria in 1855 were now lucky to receive 10/- per day when work was available. The colonial manufacture of vehicles was being seriously challenged:—

The Yankees import almost every conceivable form of carriage which spoils the trade here. They send a set of naves, ready [made] spokes dressed and ready to go, together with the felloes for thirty shillings.¹⁰

According to Bushby, assembling imported parts was the only profitable kind of wheelwrighting since Yankee hickory and iron tyres were cheaper and superior, although ironbark and spotted gum were commonly used for spokes and felloes of the heavier waggon wheels. Body builders had to import Baltic and American timber because colonial timber was too brittle for bending and consequently of little use in coachwork.

Trade deteriorated further during the early months of 1866. The long drought led to the abandonment of many large stations and the bankruptcy of several leading business houses, as well as further increases in the prices of meat, butter and vegetables. Finally Chile, the colony's chief source of imported flour, was racked by war and consequently bread prices soared. Although the government encouraged immigrants to leave overcrowded Brisbane for the northern ports, the latest census showed that Rockhampton was losing population due to the failure of the local gold fields and the opening of a new field near Otago in New Zealand. Tales of the severe winters there discouraged Bushby from leaving Brisbane, but he was far from happy with an employer whom he described as

. . . an elderly man . . . dressed in the most fashionable cut available for a *young* man, but which always looks untidy on him, of a full habit (with drink), beard a la Napoleon, a most insufferable swagger in talk and walk, such a superior patronising air towards those he fancies in his power, one might almost think he was majesty itself, but for the meanness which now and then will display itself.¹¹

Nevertheless, Bushby remarked on the plentiful supply of cheap horses and the homogeneity of colonial dress—crimson shirt, "leather strip" trousers and shoes—which removed two of the most conventional criteria of status in English society:—

. . . everybody rides—men and women from the squatter's wife down to the maid of all work.¹²

Similarly, there was little difference in the diet of worker and employer. Meat was comparatively cheap by English standards and was eaten roast or boiled at every meal since it could not be kept fresh for more than six hours. In December 1865 butchers were selling out by 6.30 a.m.

Perhaps it was these levelling features of colonial society which caused Bushby to disapprove of his sister Annie's intention of becoming a nurse:—

I have somehow conceived a most *unjust* and reprehensible prejudice to service.¹³

On the other hand he did not succumb to Brisbane's godlessness and remained ". . . very regular in his attendance of Divine worship".¹⁴ Although there were more ministers there "than in any other part of the world", there were a "woful [sic] lot of Catholics"¹⁵ and the inhabitants celebrated Easter in shooting and boating expeditions. But if their souls were impure, at least their linen was clean. Bushby remarked that despite the cost of washing (4/- -6/- per dozen articles) "the majority of the people wear all white clothing".¹⁶ He compromised by learning to swim.

In December Bushby was incapacitated by a "bilious fever", probably contracted from drinking water now selling at 8/- per barrel. Writing from Fortitude Valley he remarked wryly that he would need considerable fortitude to recover from the ministrings of an incompetent doctor. Abstaining from stone fruit, regarded as conducive to fevers, he gradually recovered his health although he continued to seek cures for diarrhoea. Finally he sent out some aborigines for wattle bark which seems to have been a popular colonial remedy.

The drought was broken in early May by ten days of continual rain which reduced Brisbane streets to mudholes, but the impending credit crisis loomed nearer. There was a serious shortage of gold sovereigns and silver coins, necessitating the issue of 10/- notes, and rumours were current that Peto, Brassey and Betts had failed. A number of navvies were dismissed from the railway works. Then on 11 July the Union Bank refused to honour government cheques; news had been telegraphed from Adelaide after the arrival of a steamer from Bombay that a new English loan had been unsuccessful. Rumours of war between Austria and Prussia had resulted in a run on the English joint-stock banks, breaking Agra and Masterman and five others, as well as several companies including Peto, Brassey and Betts. Falling prices of wool, cotton, hides and tallow further depressed economic conditions in the colony.¹⁷

Since there were no private financial resources in the colony to assist the government, a select committee recommended the issue of legal tender notes and Treasury bills, but the plan was rejected by Governor Bowen. All public works were immediately stopped, throwing thousands out of work until an agreement could be reached with another bank. Special constables were sworn in.

Bennet, Bushby's current employer, dismissed all his employees with the exception of Bushby and three others. Nevertheless he resisted the wheelwright's claim of £30 in arrears until half an hour before he "cleared out" for Sydney on the "Lady Bowen". The credit failure apparently cost him £100 which he had saved, since recovering from his illness, towards a passage home.

Arriving in Sydney on 8 August, he worked for the Panama and New Zealand Mail Company for some days before finding a job wheelwrighting in a coachmaker's shop. But Sydney was also in the throes of the economic depression and conditions in Melbourne were reputed to be far worse. Three of his Queensland "chums" sailed for California—passages from Sydney and Melbourne were £4 and immigrants who were able to put up £30 had £26 returned to them on arrival, as well as a block of land on five-year rent-free leasehold, together with seeds and implements. Shipments of Californian flour were already being sold in Sydney for £9 per ton.

Bushby's job did not last and so on 14 September he sailed for California on the barque "Coya" of 500 tons, having entrusted to a friend a locket to be sent to his beloved Emily.¹⁸ Perhaps he had been tempting fate in earlier protestations of the "nonchalance" with which colonials undertook long sea voyages. The "Coya" was lost 60 miles off San Francisco and Bushby was last seen by the captain (one of the three survivors) clinging to a hen-coop.



Railway Workers of the 1860s

REFERENCES

1. *Bushby*, Francis John; Australian National Library Ms cat. no. G 055.
 (a) *Microfilm*—13 letters to his family 1865-1866, description of his work and conditions in Queensland; one letter from William Johnson *re* his death (1867).
 (b) *Typescript*—four letters to his sister 1866 and a poem; one letter from T. Shelbourne (1867).

Copies of the microfilm and typescript may be seen at the Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.

The Ms letters are in the possession of Bushby's nephew, Mr W. M. Bushby of 1 Evesham Road, Reigate, Surrey, who is over 85. In a letter (12 Oct., 1965) to the author of this article Mr Bushby explained that he had not read the letters until Margaret Kiddle visited him in Surrey, after which he typed them and deposited a bound copy in the Library at Worthing, Sussex. Margaret Kiddle arranged for the microfilming of 13 letters but apparently did not see the others which were typed by Mr Bushby and sent to the Australian National Library. However, it is apparent from additional information provided by Mr Bushby that there are still one or two letters which have been missed.

Frank does not seem to have been in contact with George and Mary Bushby of West Tarring, Sussex, who migrated to Swan River in 1829 as indentured servants to Edward Henty (v. Marnie Bassett.—*The Hentys*. London, 1954). They accompanied him to Van Dieman's Land and thence to Port Phillip where, according to Mr W. M. Bushby, George or one of his sons was successful as a wine-merchant. George and his sons are not mentioned in Margaret Kiddle's *Men of Yesterday*, although it is possible that she contacted Mr W. M. Bushby in an attempt to trace the other members of the family.

2. T. A. Coghlan.—*Labour and industry in Australia*. London, 1918, vol. 2, p. 937.
3. Bushby, 10 Mar., 1865.
4. *ibid.*, 14 Sep., 1865.
5. Bushby does not mention his employer's name, but Mr C. Ferguson, coachmaker, of Russell Street, Toowoomba, has supplied the following list of coach and waggon builders in the trade in 1865:—

Waggon builders
 Lovell & Wensley
 O'Riley
 Hawes
 Olding

Coach builders
 Weimer
 Trevithan

6. *ibid.*, 15 Aug., 1865.
7. *ibid.*
8. V. also W. J. H. Harris.—*First steps—Queensland workers' moves towards political expression*. Printed by the author, Brisbane, 1965, p. 2.
9. *Brisbane Courier*, 17 Jul., 1866.
10. Bushby, 15 Feb., 1866.
Felloes are sections of wooden rim, one for every two spokes.
11. *ibid.*, Apr., 1866.
12. *ibid.*, 15 Aug., 1865.
13. *ibid.*, 15 Jul., 1866.
14. T. Shelbourne, San Francisco, 9 Jul., 1867.
15. Bushby, 17 Jul., 1866.
16. *ibid.*, 16 Mar., 1866.
17. *Brisbane Courier*, 11 Jul., 1866.
18. Shelbourne *op. cit.* (Shelbourne had booked a passage on the "Coya" but did not pay his deposit. He had looked after Bushby during his illness.)