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STEPHEN CHEEK

... and the Invasion of Bream Creek



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THE INVASION OF BREAM CREEK

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Stephen Cheek (1852-1883)

Bream Creek in Southeast Tasmania is one of Australia's prettiest and most historic places. From its highest ridge, known as the Ragged Tier, gullies run down towards Marion Bay, giving glimpses of the rugged coastline. In the bottom of one of these gullies lies the creek from which were drawn the fish which gave the scattered community its name. These days, many of these gullies are filled with vines which support boutique wineries. It is an idyllic place. Stephen Cheek, gazing out towards the south end of Maria Island in February 1879 recognized its beauty and its darkness.

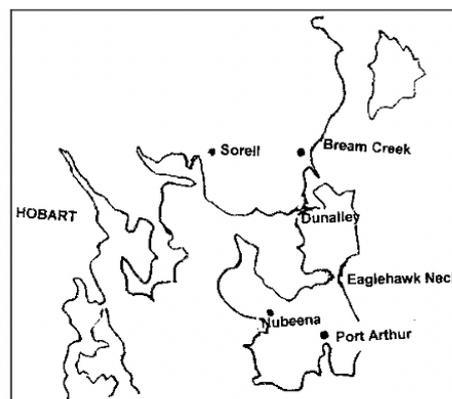
Nearby, at Blackman Bay is the site where a seaman of Abel Tasman's stepped ashore in 1642 and named the island after Van Diemen, the governor of Batavia. Daily hundreds of tourists pass by the Tasman memorial (just off the Arthur highway at Dunalley) in their rush to visit the stark ruins of the convict penal settlement at Port Arthur – a site made grimmer by the murders at the Broad Arrow café in 1996. Marion Bay itself is named after Marion (or "Marian") Du Fresne, one of the many French explorers who charted the region in the late 18th century.

In 1879, Bream Creek was a vastly different place to what it is today. It was a tough pioneering community bent on clearing forests and establishing farms. It would not be unfair to call it a "frontier" settlement, with all that implies in both geography and demography. Indeed, the attraction of Port Arthur as a penal settlement lay in the ability to seal off the narrow necks of land that join the Tasman peninsula to the Forestier Peninsula (Eaglehawk Neck), and the latter to the hinterland. Once across the last natural frontier – the narrow strip of land at East Bay Neck (Dunalley) - overland access is possible to the north and the west towards Hobart. Escape from Port Arthur was possible and at least one convict, the notorious Martin Cash, was able to escape the Tasman peninsula by swimming across shark infested waters rather than face the guards and dogs at Eaglehawk Neck.

The last convict ship arrived in Van Diemen's land in 1853. Among the last arrivals were many Irish whose crimes were more political than moral. The penitentiary at Port Arthur was wound down and finally closed in 1877. The economic effects on the local industry (dairying and agriculture) of this are not known, but there would have been some dislocation. Settlement was facilitated by land releases following the *Waste Lands Act of 1870* and selectors began to move in. It is likely that some former convicts

chose to stay in the area they knew well. Dunalley served as the port from which produce was transported to Hobart Town: the overland route through Sorell and Richmond being long and torturous. Later a canal was dug at Dunalley to facilitate this trade.

In 1879, an invasion of sorts took place at Bream Creek. It was not a reprisal by Indigenous Tasmanians or the arrival, at last, of the long-expected French. It was the appearance in the community of a man with no weapon other than the Bible i.e., Stephen Cheek. As he did in many places he visited, Cheek simply walked in - following the coastline from somewhere on Hobart's eastern shore. That was very long walk! A report in the *Jubilee History* speaks of the "extremely low moral and religious condition" of the community.¹



South-east Tasmania

Religious development

The story of Stephen Cheek's religious development is briefly as follows. Born in England in 1852, he grew up in a devout Congregational family in northern Tasmania. He was converted to Christ as a young man, became a teacher, was active as a lay preacher and began studying with a view to ministry in the Congregational church. After reading a letter on baptism published by G.B. Moysey of Hobart Church of Christ, Cheek sought to be immersed. However, because Moysey was unavailable, he was baptized by an (Open) Brethren evangelist in December 1875. He resigned from his position as a teacher, broke off his engagement to be married, and became an itinerant evangelist associated with the Christian (or "Open") Brethren. Later he came to question the view that baptism was essential for local church membership but not for salvation and the practice of admitting the "unsaved" (in his terms, the unrepentant and unbaptized) to the Lord's Supper i.e., "open" communion. Cheek came to question both the consistency and scriptural-ness of such practices.² This put him on a collision course with his Brethren colleagues. A casual conversation with R.C. Fairlam in 1876³ may have triggered these doubts. According to the *Jubilee History*, Fairlam was the "first representative of Apostolic Christianity" in Tasmania,⁴ setting up the Lord's Table in the north-west in 1865.

After evangelistic work in (mainly) northern Tasmania, Cheek crossed to Victoria in 1878 and undertook successful evangelistic campaigns west of Melbourne. Many baptisms resulted and several

¹ Jubilee History, p.143

² Cheek, 1880

³ Ely, p13

⁴ Jubilee History, p133

churches were formed. The *Jubilee History* report from Taradale⁵ says that on first coming to that district, Cheek regarded himself as “belonging to the Brethren.” Two conferences took place between Cheek and representatives from the churches at Taradale, Elphinstone, Drummond Creek, Castlemaine, Barker’s Creek, and Wedderburn. Following these (the report states) “S. Cheek entirely identified himself in the work of Churches of Christ.”⁵ A decisive break with the Brethren seems to have occurred after Cheek presented his views to a meeting of Brethren evangelists in Northern Tasmania in January 1879.⁶ The assumption therefore is that when Cheek walked into Bream Creek in February 1879 he did so as a Churches of Christ sympathizer, if not an affiliate.

Coningsby ‘Con’ Gordon (who served as an itinerant evangelist in Tasmania in the 1890s and knew the Colony well), uses the term “invade” to describe Cheek’s initial work at Bream Creek:

Brother Stephen Cheek, whose name is still a household word among the brotherhood of Tasmania, invaded the Bream Creek district with the primitive gospel in the early part of this year [1879]. In his judgment, the ignorance of this community as respects religious matters was so profound as to justify comparison with ancient Egypt. But so immediate and salutary were the effects that a church of fifty members was established in the district within seven weeks after its proclamation by Brother Cheek. A few months later several brethren from Bream Creek removed to Tasman’s Peninsula and organized a church in that region [presumably, Impression Bay, now Nubeena].⁷

One suspects that the word ‘invaded’ used here reflects some ‘tongue in cheek’ [no pun intended] on Gordon’s part. He was alluding to the forcefulness of Cheek’s approach and his impact on the community. But “invaded” is consistent with American, J.J. Haley’s description of Cheek:

Possessed of fine powers of logical discrimination, and such a mastery of the source of knowledge, when his opponent claimed for the Bible for what it did not teach, he exposed himself to enfilading fire from Brother Cheek’s scriptural guns and was practically out of the fight before the debate was half over.

“Enfilading fire?” “Guns” “Fight”? Haley himself was an excellent orator and debater and qualified to judge an effective preacher.⁸ To the modern reader, Cheek may appear to be a mindless dogmatist. However, it is impossible to read the accounts of Haley and others without concluding that Cheek had a clever and subtle mind open to new scriptural insights. Haley anticipates the “mindless dogmatist” accusation as follows:

⁵ JH, pp 265-266.

⁶ Ely, p13

⁷ Jubilee History, p133

⁸ JH, p.241, see portrait of Haley at JH p.161.

We have sometimes associated with preachers for years without ever hearing anything new or fresh from their lips. They were destitute of a single trace of original thought. But no one could listen to Bro. Cheek very long, either in private conversation or his public utterances, without having fresh combinations of thought and new expositions of the Divine Word suggested to his mind.

Cheek's skill lay not so much in his oratory but in his ability to marshal biblical knowledge, to interpret scripture with scripture, and present the gospel in fresh and interesting ways. A teacher, he reflected something of an educator's interrogatory approach which some may have found confronting. He was able to maintain contacts through voluminous correspondence and for several years (1880-1883) edited a journal *Truth in Love*⁹ with a circulation that reached 2,000. This was for a time the unofficial journal of Churches of Christ and the masthead continues to be used within the acapella churches of Christ. It is a measure of his regard for Cheek's scholarship that A.B. Maston¹⁰ saw fit to publish a book of Cheek's articles and essays eleven years after Cheek's death.¹¹ Though lacking formal ministry training, Cheek was no illiterate redneck.

Cheek left Bream Creek in April 1879. Some 49 baptisms had resulted from this brief visit, many immersed in Bream Creek. When he returned in September, earlier hostility, expressed in the disruption of meetings and baptisms, erupted into physical violence. On the evening of 8 September 1879, following one of his services, four men with blackened faces set upon Cheek and severely beat him up. At the urging of his supporters, who had also suffered harassment, Cheek took legal action against the offenders. In the proceedings at Sorell Police Court¹² evidence was produced that Cheek had been flogged with a knotted rope, beaten with sticks, and pelted with rotten eggs. He had been threatened that if he did not leave Bream Creek within 24 hours, he would be "tied to a tree and his flesh separated from his bones". A Mr. Cresswell, on behalf of the defendants described Cheek as having turned "Bream Creek upside and converted it into bear garden, turning father against son, daughter against mother, neighbour against neighbour and family against family."

Cheek's attorney made it clear that it was not damages that were being sought but recognition of the principle that such an assault had "no place in any British community where liberty and faith were the glory of the people" i.e., freedom of religion and speech.¹³ The Bench accepted the charge of assault, describing it as cowardly and unacceptable in British society. However, noting that revenge was not being sought the Bench limited the penalty to a fine of 90 shillings and sixpence each but warned the defendants if they offended again, they would be imprisoned. The fines were paid for by subscription. It is not known whether Cheek contributed to this subscription – but that would not have been beyond

⁹ Title derived from Ephesians 4:15

¹⁰ Editor of *The Australian Christian* from 1898

¹¹ Maston, 1894

¹² *The Mercury*, Hobart, 18/9/1879

¹³ There are similarities here to Paul's claim for justice as a Roman citizen - see Acts 22:25 ff.

his generous nature. Cheek, however, was a poor man who could have benefited from the award of damages. According to Haley, Cheek relied on others for food and lodging, his clothing was often threadbare, and he declined monetary gifts more than his immediate requirements. He was known to sleep sometimes beside the track. Inadequate clothing later contributed to his early demise. In a whimsical footnote to the trial, it was reported that Cheek's hat was stolen during the proceedings and that "he had to go home without one."¹⁴ In the event, Cheek's plea for leniency for the defendants was good policy. There was an end to the harassment of the Bream Creek congregation. But it was also the end for the time being of his mission there. Though he stayed for another week or so, no further fruit resulted. Cheek was dispirited....and he was beginning to suffer from headaches. But fruit did come. Eighteen months later, on returning from Victoria, Cheek had the pleasure of baptizing Albert Mundy, one of his attackers! Cheek rejoiced that his black-faced assailant "had been made white."¹⁵

During that period¹⁶ the Bream Creek and Tasman peninsula churches were consolidated, Cheek firmed up his association with Churches of Christ and the break with the Open Brethren became absolute. Relations between the two groups were not helped by Cheek's efforts to convert his former (Brethren) brothers and sisters. Cheek was delighted during this time to be able to arrange a public debate with a Presbyterian minister, called Doctor, and C.J. Brammall, the Anglican priest at Sorell, the regional centre. These clerics enjoyed a good ecumenical relationship, the Anglicans using the Presbyterian chapel while their own place of worship, St. George's, was being rebuilt. There were some elements of vaudeville about this debate which was held in the open air between 3.00 pm to 7.00 pm to accommodate the crowd. The Reverend Doctor retired early (offended, and theologically wounded) but Cheek was impressed with the candour of Reverend Brammall:

[H]e was a candid gentleman and in response to some very plain questions I put to him, he admitted to the surprise of all, that faith and repentance were the essentials of baptism, that scripture gave no authority for obeying the Lord by proxy, that his practice with regard to baptism had only human authority...

The Reverends Brammall and Doctor were respected and educated men. But the outcome reinforced perceptions of the fallibility of mainline clergy. Ely has described the invasion of Bream Creek as essentially a clash between two inherently different forms of Protestantism – one a communal or civic form (church coextensive with the state) and another more personalized and based on conviction. This is clear in this debate – but the dichotomy does not do justice to Cheek's concerns about other protestant groups based around personal conviction such as the Brethren, the Baptists, and the Wesleyans.

¹⁴ *The Mercury* 23/9/1879

¹⁵ Ely, p.25

¹⁶ 1981/82

EVANGELISM AND DISPUTATION

The primary role of the evangelist is to convince people of sin and their need for salvation. Apologetic and disputation were the evangelists' stock in trade. Evangelists from all the non-conformist sects were occasionally confronting – none better than the Wesleyans with their open-air preaching. Where they differed was in their views on how the process of incorporation into Christ occurred and how the Christian life was to be sustained within the Body of Christ.

Cheek, of course, had something to prove to former Congregational and Brethren coreligionists. He was critical of mainline clerics whom he believed obscured the way to salvation. Not surprisingly, he made a few enemies and there were attempts to disrupt services and baptisms.

Debate and disputation are related to the adversarial system which goes to the heart of the English legal and political systems.

Alexander Campbell engaged in three major public debates. In semi-literate societies, before radio and television, public debates were an effective way of bringing prominent issues to people – and often great entertainment as well. Today, we use websites like Twitter and TV shows, like ABC's Q&A to debate political issues.

Cheek also had a memorable debate with Wesleyan, B.A. Butchers in Victoria.

Events in Cheek's itinerant life were now being influenced by developments elsewhere. F.W. Troy from Queensland, at his own expense, travelled to Melbourne to seek the assistance of an evangelist for the fledgling cause in Queensland. On the suggestion of J.J. Haley, Victorian Conference President, he contacted Cheek and joined him on a brief last visit to Bream Creek and the Tasman Peninsula. They later visited churches in Victoria, arriving in Queensland in July 1882, after a brief stopover in Sydney where they addressed the churches at Newtown (later Enmore) and Sydney (later Surry Hills). Cheek based his evangelistic mission in the Downs area of South-East Queensland. Cheek and Troy campaigned at Zillmere's Waterholes and a small church was commenced in August 1882. This was claimed to be the first Church of Christ in Queensland.¹⁷ A small church was also started at Rosewood (January 1883) and meetings were held at Toowoomba and Warwick.

Though solid foundations were laid, Cheek was not as effective there as he had been in Tasmania or Victoria. But his time was short. His headaches were getting worse and presciently he wrote to his friends in Tasmania saying that he did not expect to see them again. Cheek died of a fever not long after having walked thirty-five kilometres from Killarney to Warwick in the rain on 17 February 1883. He was in a weakened state and inadequately clothed. He was just 31 years of age!

¹⁷ *Venturing in Faith*, 1983

News of Cheek's death brought a huge outpouring of grief among his friends and converts. A huge memorial (thirteen feet high) was erected over his grave in Warwick cemetery by the "Christian Brethren in Australia and Tasmania."¹⁸ This memorial is the closest to a shrine ever erected to the memory of an affiliate of Churches of Christ in Australia. The following photo of his grave obelisk is extracted from *Jubilee History* (1903) which devoted two full pages to the memorial and its description. This attention must be regarded as measure of the respect with which Cheek was held twenty years after he had died.



Memorial to Stephen Cheek at
Warwick

As late as 1940, Cheek's memory could evoke a strong response. In that year, in conjunction with a regional celebration, a pilgrimage of cars from south-east Queensland converged on Cheek's grave for a memorial service. The 200 pilgrims included Mrs. H.G. Payne, wife of the Kedron minister who was among those who farewelled Cheek from Melbourne, and Thomas Geraghty (Troy's brother-in-law) of Annerley who walked from Zillmere to welcome Cheek to Brisbane in 1882.¹⁹

The last expression of grief might be left to Haley who knew Cheek personally and recommended him to Troy.

*Of all the men I have known, in a wide experience and observation of man, no one has ever obtained the hold on me that Stephen Cheek did. I have never been able to speak of him in public without breaking down, and now after he has been in the grave twenty years, I cannot write of him without shedding tears.*²⁰

Much of this grief stems from a recognition of Cheek's character – as Richard Ely succinctly put it – his "force, sincerity, and vivacity.... a good friend to his friends and a bad enemy to their enemies."²¹ He may have been somewhat of a literalist – but in the same vein he took his own call to discipleship and that of others very seriously. He gave up much to follow his "call," including a comfortable, respectable life as a teacher, marriage and the love of his father who never forgave his son's defection from Congregationalism.

¹⁸ Tasmania was not technically part of Australia at this stage.

¹⁹ *The Courier-Mail* 27/1/1940

²⁰ Haley in *Chapman*, p.453

²¹ Ely, p.33

MORE CHEEK THAN CHEEK, OR GAMER THAN NED KELLY?

Stephen Cheek became a folk hero among the isolated communities which in some sense felt marginalized. Interestingly, Stephen Cheek was a contemporary of the notorious Australian bushranger, Ned Kelly (1855 – 1880). The wounded Kelly's last stand at Glenrowan with guns ablaze as he walked towards the surrounding police is deeply etched in the Australian psyche. Kelly became a folk hero, particularly among the poor Irish underclass, for his courage and stance against harsh authority. Interestingly, Cheek was sometimes likened to Kelly, to whom he bore a physical resemblance. Cheek was amused by his reception by a young lady from Bream Creek:

"It is sometimes amusing to hear conjectures as to who I am. Some say it may be 'Kelly.' Well, it is not Kelly, but it is a bushranger."

"Before I came here a young woman belonging to Bream Creek was on a visit 16 miles away. I met with her and spoke with her about her soul. After I left the house she said to others in real alarm 'Oh! He's a Baptist, and before he goes away, he'll dip me, and I'm sure it will kill me.'²²

"If our religion costs us nothing it is because we esteem it of little value" (Stephen Cheek)

"Righteousness must be balanced by love" (Stephen Cheek)

In accepting the description of him as a "bushranger," Cheek undoubtedly had in mind his long walks through the bush to confront people with the gospel.

While the exploits of Ned Kelly are well-known, it is of interest in this context to note that the most audacious bush ranging act in Australia's history occurred at Sorell in 1825, when Matthew Brady and his gang held up Sorell and captured the local army garrison (see Cox, Robert. *Baptized in Blood*. Wellington Bridge Press, 2010).

²² Recounted in Ely, R p.17

Legacy

Cheek caught the imagination of pioneering communities. For those, especially in Tasmania, whose knowledge of Christianity was limited to compulsory church musters or the occasional ministrations of representatives of civic religion, he provided a breath of fresh air. There is also a sense which the trial at Sorell represented a flexing of the muscle of “the little people” – their right not only to the freedom of religion and speech – but also their equality before the law. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it would be derelict to not also recognize that Cheek’s “no nonsense” approach moved many unreflective souls, like the rough-hewn Albert Mundy, to examine their lives, to find release and meaning in a conversion experience and to have the opportunity for a new life. To the farmers of the Ragged Tier, who were preoccupied with the problems of daily subsistence and seasonal cycles, Cheek opened a world that lay beyond, and to an eternal realm. The true legacy of Cheek’s contribution must be found in the lives of the many that were influenced into some form of Christian service as result of Cheek’s ministry. Cheek left an enduring legacy in south-east Tasmania. Twenty years after his death, the *Jubilee History*²³ reports the membership at Bream Creek as 69 and the daughter church at Impression Bay (Nubeena) as 50, making these churches the second and third largest in Tasmania (after Hobart with a membership of 141). For many years, these churches survived without regular ministry while other little churches in Tasmania failed.²⁴ In terms of religious adherence (rather than membership), as late as 1965, Churches of Christ had the second largest denominational affiliation in that part of Tasmania.²⁵ Today, two churches in the region continue with a Churches of Christ affiliation – at Sorrel and Nubeena. The church at Copping (near Bream Creek) became an interdenominational community church, which incorporated former Churches of Christ chapels at Kellevie (also in the Ragged Tier) and Bream Creek [see photo]. Their stories and why some churches in Tasmania survived and others failed remain for another time.

Copping Christian Fellowship

Chapels were relocated from Kellevie and Burnt Hill (Bream Creek). The Kellevie chapel was built in 1895 after the original one was destroyed by fire during a wave of arson.



(Source: Sorell Heritage Study).

²³ JH, p.146

²⁴ See Gordon in JH, p133

²⁵ After Anglican / Church of England

This story has been primarily about the “invasion” of Bream Creek and its consequences. A deeper study of the sociological factors in play at Bream Creek may throw some light on why ministries in some areas are more effective than in others.

FOR REFLECTION

The theological issues that led to Cheek’s withdrawal from the Brethren: open communion, open membership, and the essentiality of baptism – would not be divisive today. Over the years accommodations (compromises?) on these doctrines have been reached. It is tempting therefore to reduce Cheek to an historical anachronism. The issues however are substantive, and one wonders what sense future historians and sociologists will make of the matters that preoccupy the church today. Central to Cheek’s ministry was the imperative of the gospel. As Haley put it “... his devotion to the Bible was supreme ... his knowledge of the Book was little short of phenomenal.” (Death of Bro. Cheek).

Churches of Christ make much of the Campbell/Stone heritage stemming from the USA, but Cheek was a home spun reformer, a frontiersman, who in his theologically formative years, quite possibly never heard of Alexander Campbell or Barton W. Stone. But he quickly embraced the central tenets of the Campbell-Stone movement once these were pointed out to him. His editorship of *Truth in Love* reflects the influences of Isaac Errett and *The Christian Standard*. The religious experience of the Australian frontier was every bit as exciting as that of the U.S.A. Cheek came from a Congregational/Brethren background.

What is exciting about Churches of Christ in Australia is the variety of denominational traditions from which its founding fathers and mothers were drawn. With diverse backgrounds in different colonies (e.g., Wesleyans in NSW and Scotch Baptists in SA, German Baptists in Queensland), somehow or other, a homogeneous communion emerged by the late 1800’s. Finally, the Bream Creek experience draws attention to the relevance of sociological factors, demographics and even geography in the growth and survival of churches. A preoccupation with “one best way” approaches to ministry, which ignore such factors, is dangerous.

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Stephen Cheek's memorial plaque inscriptions

Front of plaque

In memory of Stephen Cheek, Evangelist of the Church of Christ, who, having as an honoured instrument in God's hands brought many souls to a knowledge of Jesus, fell asleep 17 Feb 1883.

"He being dead, yet speaketh."

Left side inscription

"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned."

Back inscription

Erected in loving remembrance, by Christian brethren in Australia and Tasmania.

Right side inscription

Away from his home and friends of his youth,
He hasted: the herald of mercy and truth,
For the love of the Lord, and to seek the lost.
And he fell like a soldier: he died at his post.

ⁱ Ely, p.265