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Danish Settler-Colonial Communities in Australia and New Zealand

by
Julie K. Allen

The vast majority of Danish emigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, around four hundred thousand people between 1850 and 1950, settled in the United States, from whom more than 1.3 million Americans claim descent. Significant numbers of Danes also went to other countries, however, including about 15,000 Danes who settled in Argentina; 3,500 Danes who immigrated to New Zealand, reaching their peak at one percent of the New Zealand population in 1878; and around 50,000 Danes who immigrated to Australia,\(^1\) a significant percentage of which later re-immigrated to Denmark; in 1988, approximately 165,000 people, or one percent of Australia’s population at that time, claimed some Danish ancestry. Although Danes never made up a significant percentage of the populations of either New Zealand or Australia, they established communities for themselves in Australasia that gave rise to a unique hybrid cultural identity.

While some of the challenges of migration are universal, such as uprooting oneself from a familiar home, leaving behind family and friends, facing a journey that may be financially burdensome and physically challenging, the specific details of Danish immigration to the Antipodes between 1850 and 1930 differ in some important respects from the more familiar narratives of Danes in America, resulting in a different transnational identity than that of Danish Americans. This article documents a few of these Danish immigrant communities in Australia and New Zealand and considers how these Antipodean settler-colonists negotiated the preservation of their Danish traditions while transitioning to a new world.

Individual Danes made their way to Australia very early on, as sailors, convicts, and agricultural laborers. The earliest Dane to visit Australia was Johannes Bremer, of Copenhagen, who anchored off Cape Inscription in December 1696 with the Dutch captain Willun de Vlaming.\(^2\) The first Danish ship to reach the area was the frigate Fredensborg Slot, which sighted the Montebello Islands off Australia’s
northwest coast in 1718, more than half a century before Captain Cook explored the southeastern and eastern parts of the continent in the 1780s. However, from 1788, when Australia became a British colony, until 1850, only British ships were allowed to trade with British colonies, so few Danish sailors reached Australian shores. New Zealand did not become a British colony until 1840, and so was less affected by those regulations. A few of the earliest recorded Danish immigrants to Australia are Julius Ditlev Møller, who arrived in 1838 and managed a cattle station near Leopold, near the entrance to the Bellarine Peninsula southwest of Melbourne, and Charles Wolff, who arrived in Geelong in 1842.3

The most notorious and flamboyant Danish immigrant to Australia was undoubtedly the adventurer Jørgen Jørgensen (1780-1841), who worked on the survey vessel Lady Nelson in 1800 and helped to survey Tasmania (known at the time as Van Diemens Land). He returned to Britain on a sailing ship in 1806, and fought for Denmark in the Napoleonic Wars in 1808. He was taken captive by the British, but, while on parole, accompanied two British merchant voyages to Iceland in 1809-10, as part of the second of which he staged a coup, arrested the Danish governor of Iceland, and named himself Protector, in the spirit of an Enlightened despot. Forcibly returned to England by British troops, he was found guilty of breaking his parole. After years of drinking, gambling, spying for the British in France and Germany, he ended up in London’s Newgate Prison in 1820 for pawning his landlady’s furniture and was transported to Australia in 1825, where he again assisted in surveying the territory on several journeys. As compensation for these efforts, he was pardoned in 1835. That same year, he published his autobiography, The Convict King: Being the Life and Adventures of Jorgen Jorgensen, Monarch of Iceland, Naval Captain, Revolutionist, British Diplomatic Agent, Author, Dramatist, Preacher, Political Prisoner, Gambler, Hospital Dispenser, Continental Traveller, Explorer, Editor, Expatriate Exile, and Colonial Constable, which captures the expansive nature of his life quite well. An adventurer to the end, Jørgensen died in Hobart in 1841.4

Aside from such isolated individuals, most Danish settler-colonists came to Australasia in either the period 1850-80, either to make their fortunes in the goldfields or in connection with assisted
immigration schemes sponsored by the governments of Australia and New Zealand. The former category included about 5,000 Scandinavians, almost evenly divided between Swedes and Danes, leavened by just a few hundred Norwegians, who came in the early 1850s. About 1,000 Danes, many of them former soldiers in the Danish army that had been disbanded after the First Schleswig War, had arrived by 1857, concentrated in the Bendigo, Ballarat, and Castlemaine areas, but the annexation of Slesvig-Holsten by Prussia in 1864 prompted a larger second wave of Danish immigration to Australia, almost all of them young single men. 1,014 residents of Danish birth were recorded in Victoria in the 1871 census, a number that rose to 1,039 by 1881, peaked at 1,394 in 1891, and fell to 1,020 in 1901.5

The goldfields of Gippsland reflect their erstwhile Scandinavian prospector population in such town names as “The Rose of Denmark Reef, the Scandinavian Reef, Walhalla, Jorgensen’s Creek, and Danes’ Creek.” Predominantly male and mostly unmarried, many Danes spent their Christmases together at either the Golden Hope Hotel at Fryer’s Creek or the Five Flags Hotel at Campbell’s Creek, both of which were run by the Danish couple Hans and Esther Appel, while two other Slesvigers—Claus Grønn and Hans Möller—ran shanties. Carl Tolstrup ran a general store/drapery shop/post office, Thomas

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Petersen ran a feed store/smithy called Copenhagen, and the town was also home to a Danish butcher and a Danish tailor.6

While many of these prospectors—among them the future Danish journalist Robert Watt (1837-94)—subsequently returned home after the gold ran out, several hundred of them remained and put down roots, particularly in the state of Victoria. For example, Danes in Ballarat established a Scandinavian Society in 1857, under the auspices of which they celebrated the wedding of Crown Prince Frederik (later King Frederik VIII) to Princess Louisa of Sweden in 1869. Many erstwhile prospectors returned to the trades they had learned back in Denmark, or went into business as storekeepers, hotelkeepers, insurance agents, or established homesteads, but they held on to their Danish culture. In Gippsland, the Jorgensen brothers Niels, Laust, Andreas, and Hans had spearheaded the Haunted Stream gold rush, which enabled them to retire in comfort and bring their parents and younger siblings out from Slesvig, where the German occupation had become increasingly oppressive after 1864. The brewer Jacob Cohn was elected mayor of Bendigo twice, while his brother Moritz, also a brewer, was elected mayor in Talbot, eighty-five kilometers to the southeast, while Danish naval veteran Peter Alroe became mayor of Sebastopol, just south of Ballarat.

The Royal Art Academy-trained architect Christian Julius Toxværd [Toxward] (1831-91), tried his luck in the goldfields of Ballarat in the 1850s, but moved on to Invercargill, on the southern tip of South Island, New Zealand, in 1861. In 1866, he settled in Wellington, where he became the first major architect in private practice, in which capacity he designed and renovated several churches and

Architect Julius Toxværd in his Danish consul uniform. Private collection.
office buildings and facilitated the city’s transition from construction in timber to masonry. He later served as district grand mason of the local Freemason lodge, a justice of the peace, and the Danish consul in New Zealand, dying rather suddenly at the age of 59.7

Decades after the gold rush had ended, old Scandinavian prospectors would gather on Saturday nights in the 1890s in the old Prince of Wales hotel in Bendigo, Victoria, 120 kilometers southeast of Ballarat, telling their stories. One of their listeners was the recent immigrant Jens Sørensen Lyng (1868-1941), who would become one of the most influential historians of Scandinavians in Australia.8 Born near Aarhus in 1868, Lyng first embarked on a career in the Danish army before immigrating to Australia in 1891, where he worked as secretary to the pioneering German botanist Baron Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von Mueller, who surveyed vast stretches of the country, directed the Melbourne Botanical Gardens, and co-authored the seven volumes of Flora australensis with George Bentham. Lyng became a central figure in the Danish community in Melbourne, where he served as secretary of the Danish Society, assisted the pastors of the United Scandinavian Lutheran Church, edited the church’s biannual magazine, and founded the monthly newspaper Norden, which he edited and produced single-handedly from 1896 to 1906. Lyng also wrote the earliest comprehensive histories of Scandinavians in Australia, New Zealand, and the Western Pacific, including Non-Britishers in Australia (1935) and Scandinavians in Australia, New Zealand, and the Western Pacific (1939). After serving in the Australian Naval and Military Expedition Force in World War I, which occupied the

Jens Sørensen Lyng’s print shop in Melbourne. Public domain.
island of New Guinea, he co-founded the Scandinavian Progress Association in 1922, and served as president of the Danish Club Dannebrog in Melbourne in 1928.

The Danish Club Dannebrog has been a central pillar of the Danish community in Victoria for more than a century. It was founded by Danish immigrant Emil Christian Hansen and twenty fellow Danes on August 28, 1889 for the “mental and cultural enrichment of the Danish settlers in Melbourne.” After a rather tumultuous beginning, which involved deciding whether or not to allow Norwegians to join (yes at first, then no) and whether women could participate (yes at first, then no), the club meetings were held in various hotels in the city for many years, but the club moved into an elegant building on Beaconsfield Parade in St. Kilda in 1938, where it remained until 2007. Queen Margrethe II even visited there, on a state visit to Australia in 1957. The Danish Club Dannebrog still exists today, housed in the restaurant Denmark House on Lt. Bourke Street in Melbourne’s business district, and is no longer restricted to Danish expats.

The building at 177 Beaconsfield Parade where the Danish Club Dannebrog was housed for nearly seventy years. John Stanley Martin, “The Danish Club Dannebrog in Melbourne, Australia 1889-1989” (Melbourne: The Danish Club, 1989), frontispiece.
Complicating the matter of the cultural identity of Danish immigrants in Australia and New Zealand, however, is that fact that many of the Danish prospectors and the farmers that followed them two decades later came from Schleswig-Holsten, which gave them easy access to ships leaving from Hamburg, but also often resulted in their being catalogued as Germans. Most of the Danes who ended up in Tasmania, for example, were recruited by a German-born emigration agent named Frederik Buck, and established towns with names like Bismarck (later renamed Collinsville), Heidelberg (renamed first Greens Creek and then Harford), and Leipzic (a planned settlement that was never actually built). During World War I, however, when many German-born Australians were interned in prison camps and later deported back to Denmark, many of these towns and the families in them, both German and Danish, also changed their surnames to sound more British (from Johansen to Johnson, Andersen to Anderson, etc.). Given the large ethnic minorities on both sides of the Danish-German border, some of the immigrants classified as Danish may in fact have been German speakers. By way of example, when one new Danish immigrant with the very Danish name of Jens Lund arrived in Sydney in 1911, on his way to becoming a dairy farmer in Queensland, it was widely reported in Australian newspapers that the sight of a German-language sandwich board for a film featuring the Danish actress Asta Nielsen made him feel at home.

While the Danes who immigrated in the 1850s were generally chasing the gold rush, the bulk of Danish immigrants to both Australia and New Zealand in the 1870s were recruited (alongside Germans and Norwegians) through government assisted immigration schemes to go into domestic service or to clear and settle uncultivated land. One such plan was the Vogel Scheme, as the New Zealand Immigration and Public Works Acts of 1870-71 came to be known, which aimed to develop the economy and infrastructure of New Zealand in a rapid, inexpensive way, while also increasing the European population as a means of counterbalancing the large and often warlike Maori population of the North Island. Similar schemes attempted at intervals between the 1860s and 1950s brought Danes to Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and, after immigration was federalized in 1920, simply to Australia.
Valued as hard-working, White Protestant laborers, Danes targeted by such recruitment efforts were generally offered free or cheap land, guaranteed employment, and travel costs subsidized or paid upfront (to be repaid within two years). This wasn’t always quite as good a deal as it sounded, as it meant families labored under a large debt burden while they tried to cultivate their untilled land. Moreover, the land they were offered was frequently in remote tracts or overgrown forests that required a great deal of work to cultivate. However, more than a century later, the efforts of Danes who settled in Tasmania suddenly became more significant when Tasmanian native Mary Donaldson married Crown Prince Frederik in 2004.

Given the small total numbers of Danish immigrants to the Antipodes and the relatively large geographic and chronological distance between them, few exclusively or primarily Danish settlements were established. The town of Dannevirke, on North Island, New Zealand, founded by twenty-two Scandinavian families in the 1870s, is one striking exception. Although other settlers soon came to outnumber the Danes, after the hard work of clearing the brush was done, the
town welcomes visitors today with this larger-than-life, axe-bearing wooden Viking warrior and miniature Viking longship with red-striped sails that celebrate the town’s Nordic roots. Another exception is the Danish settlement at Poowong East in South Gippsland, Victoria, in Australia, which was founded in 1877 by twenty Danish gold prospectors who wanted to return to a farming lifestyle. Nearly a century and a half later, their descendants in the fifth and sixth generations still meet in their Danish Community Hall, which features the Danish flag and a portrait of Queen Margrethe II, honoring their Danish ancestors with memorial plaques and commemorative celebrations.14

As a general rule, however, most Danes in Australasia assimilated even more quickly and completely than in the US. The harsh conditions of life combined with the relatively sparse concentration of Danes, the extreme distance to the homeland, and the dominance of British colonists within the European settler communities meant that Danes eagerly and rapidly adopted the language and customs of their new homeland in order to facilitate the process of assimilation. It is quite rare to find fourth- and fifth-generation descendants of Danish immigrants who have retained external markers of their Danish identity, such as language maintenance, the practice of Danish Lutheranism, or even the preparation and consumption of Danish foods.

Yet while those external markers have faded, a network of Scandinavian organizations, like the Danish Club Dannebrog in Melbourne, have kept public interest in the heritage of Danes in Australasia alive and cultivated connections to Denmark. In the 1940s, for example, the distinguished New Zealand librarian Johannes C. Andersen founded an Anglo-Danish society to show solidarity with Denmark after the Nazi invasion.15 The Society’s stated goals of helping Denmark regain its freedom and assisting Danish immigrants show that the members felt a kinship with their fellow Danes and desired to strengthen those bonds by offering practical and symbolic assistance to them in their hour of need. During the war, the Society’s members performed at local functions to raise money for food parcels and to support the Danish resistance fighters.

In the postwar era, when a final wave of Danish migration brought thousands of new immigrants, new friendship societies sprang up, such as the Danish Society of Auckland, founded in 1957, which aims
“to preserve, maintain, promote, foster and encourage Danish history, culture and language within New Zealand,” by publishing a Danish-language newsletter and organizing language lessons, film evenings, folk dancing, meals, and other events to celebrate Danish holidays, festivals, and traditions, including Danish Lutheran Christmas services. At the same time, the club pursues a stated goal of promoting “understanding and relations between Danes and New Zealanders and other ethnic people in New Zealand,” which is a more challenging task, given the problematic settlement history of the region.

While such ethnic clubs celebrate the heroic valor of their ancestors’ pioneering efforts, the complicated ways in which Danish immigrants were implicated in the settler-colonial project of displacing and disenfranchising the native peoples of Australia and New Zealand have not yet been widely explored. Unlike their Viking ancestors who colonized primarily empty islands in the North Atlantic, nineteenth-century Danish colonists in New Zealand came to a land already inhabited and culturally inscribed. Their recruitment was part of an organized effort to increase the European population as a means of counterbalancing both the Māori in New Zealand and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Yet, at the same time, despite their white skin, Danish immigrants were themselves subject to exploitation and neglect by colonial governments and faced significant obstacles to survival, which reminds us how important it is that we strive to understand the stories of our Danish ancestors and their kin in context of the times in which they lived.

Endnotes

5 Martin, 2.
6 Lyng, 23.
9 Martin, 7.
13 Peter Birkelund, “Danish Emigration to Australia,” in Danish Emigration to Australia, 39.
14 Jensen, “Poowong East,” 95.
15 Original document in the Dannevirke Museum of History, copy in author’s possession.
17 Burr, Mosquitos & Sawdust, 6.