



The Bated Shining Sword:  
The Colonial Defence Force as a Mirror  
of Colonial Society in South Australia,  
1836 - 1901.

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## Contents

Preface	1.
Defence and Democracy	5.
Defence and Inertia	32.
Towards Maturity	37.
Officers and Gentlemen	52.
Defence and Demography	64.
Conclusion	70.
Appendix I - Muster Rolls used	73.
Appendix II - Definitions of Occupations in Tables	75.
Appendix III - Occupations of Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of a Random Selection of Volunteer Units	76.
List of S.A. Government Documents consulted	77.
Bibliography	78.

PREFACE

When H.J. Zwillenberg wrote his Master's thesis, "Citizens and Soldiers: the Defence of South Australia 1836-1901", he inserted in his preface this passage:

The work deals with the problem of defence in a society of free settlers who had, by the middle of the nineteenth century, accepted the principle of universal military service.

Perhaps he was unaware of (his bibliography, at least, fails to mention) a slightly earlier work written by Preston, Wise and Werner and called - Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and Its Interrelationships with Western Society, whose preface contains this passage:

All too often the necessity for an adequate background of political, economic, social and cultural history for the full understanding of military events has not been realised.

My contention is that the last comment was correct.

"Citizens and Soldiers" narrates the strategic questions and public debates which shaped South Australia's colonial military, and draws a comprehensible word picture of a thoroughly confusing and convoluted subject. What that work does not show is that the public and parliamentary debates over the strategic issues were themselves symptoms of South Australia's unique social order.

It has become something of a truism - almost a cliché - that armies reflect the society from which they spring. In practical terms, it has been virtually impossible for any social system to produce a military force which is not a microcosm of itself. America, the agrarian home of democracy, produced armies in the Civil War which elected their officers, and which were crippled by men taking it upon themselves to go home at harvest time. The Boers, pious and upright individualists, could not bring themselves to shell

Mafeking or Kimberley on the Sabbath, and no one man was influential enough to order such a deed. The German army of the second World War contained men who had received, all their lives, a warped and vengeful State education in Nietzschean Social Darwinism, the Superiority of the German Race, and Germany's shame at Versailles.

In South Australia's case, the ideological pressures and constraints were mercifully different to those which shaped the army of Nationalist Socialist Germany, and their effect far less dramatic: nonetheless, they were of equal significance, at least to the people on whom they acted. In some ways they were unique to South Australia, in others typical of the British stock from which South Australians, for the most part, came. Whichever is the case, they bear studying in relation to the military for the light that such study can throw on the social and political mores - or the culture - of colonial South Australia.

To anyone familiar with the great liberal principles on which the colony was founded in 1836, the growth from colony to state may seem part of a planned progression. But if this progression is examined closely, we can see it in terms of an evolution which was by no means a foregone conclusion. Often enough it was a struggle which waxed and waned, fought out by small groups, progressive or conservative, watched (sometimes apathetically) by the majority of the colonists. This process is reflected in the evolution of an effective Defence Force in South Australia.

This thesis will not narrate the course of South Australian Colonial History. Nonetheless, four facets of that history do require close attention in a discussion of

the relationship between the colony and its defenders. The idealism which permeated the early days, and which echoed through the next sixty years, is one. The principles of freedom of worship, of speech, of the press, and self-government which were written into the South Australia Act had considerable influence on the formulation of the colonial Defence Force. It must be recognised, though, that these principles were no more than a philosophy on which to base socio-political decisions. So the next facet we must consider is the growth of maturity, in a political sense, of South Australia, from the bickerings of Light and Hindmarsh, to an integrated, urbanised modern parliamentary democracy which entered the new century as part of a new nation. This progression from uncertainty and amateurishness to confident professionalism - we might say, from Athenian democracy to party politics - was mirrored in the evolution of the Colonial Defence Force. At the same time, in relative terms, South Australia exhibited many of the differences identified by Preston, Wise and Werner between a primitive society and a modern one, as it evolved. A third facet for consideration is the social structure and hierarchy - were the officers of the Colonial Defence Force the same people who led the civil life of the colony? This thesis intends to show that, in general, this was the case. Finally, it will relate the composition of the military to the demography of the colony, to show how representative of the different groups the Defence forces were.

The thesis will study the Volunteer Movement more fully than the Permanent Defence Forces. The reason for this is that the Permanent Forces were only a minute proportion of the whole defence network, and were few in number compared

with the Volunteer Movement. Formed by Act of Parliament in 1878, they were only slightly more than 200 strong, (1) while at federation the whole Colonial Defence Force was ten times that. (2) Moreover, it is necessary to show not only an evolution of the military, but also that its similarities with the parent population persisted over time. The Volunteer Movement under various names, existed from 1840 or almost the whole life of the colony. This gives us a temporal span which is not provided by the Permanent Forces, which only existed for the last twenty years before federation. Nonetheless, where pertinent, reference to the Permanent Forces will be made since they formed the core of South Australia's defence for part of our period.

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(1) Permanent Military Forces Act, 1878

(2) Perry, W., "General Joseph Maria Gordon", The Victorian Historical Journal