

## **French influences in the South Australian olive industry**

One of the many interesting questions about the history of the South Australian olive industry is why was it so successful – modestly successful but successful nonetheless and certainly more successful than we would have predicted. The early colonists and their agriculture were British and Northern European. Few had more than a superficial understanding of Mediterranean horticulture. None had studied olive culture or had any substantial experience of cultivating and processing olives. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, South Australia boasted over 70,000 productive olive trees, at least 4 commercial oil presses producing up to 200,000 litres of oil per year and an industry that some predicted would soon rival those of Mediterranean Europe!

It took less than three years to demonstrate that the South Australian climate and soils favoured the cultivation of the olive. Added to which many colonists displayed considerable ingenuity in adapting what they did know – British horticultural practice – to what they didn't, including how to grow such unfamiliar crops as tobacco, pineapples, lemons, bananas, and, of course, olives. These factors, however, explain only the initial, horticultural achievements of the industry, not its long-term development. To improve on the success of the early experimenters, South Australian olive and oil producers needed specialist knowledge of all aspects of olive culture – everything from the most productive olive varieties to methods of storing oil. For this they looked almost exclusively to France.

French olive culture influenced the South Australian olive industry, I propose, in three ways. Firstly, for mid-nineteenth century British, the south of France epitomised the

Mediterranean and therefore 'Mediterranean' and 'hot climate' horticulture. Southern France was *the* major centre of olive oil production and trade; it was logical, therefore, to imitate the French. Secondly, because of this authoritative position of the French olive industry, South Australian olive enthusiasts were advised almost exclusively by French sources of information, especially reference books, to a lesser extent French experts. Influential colonists toured French olive-growing areas . Towards the end of the nineteenth century, French-trained horticulturists settled in South Australia, bringing with them their knowledge and experience of olive culture. Thirdly, because of both of these factors, the most direct, concrete and lasting French influence on South Australian olive culture derived from the early importation of olive trees from France. Their prevalence in the olive population of South Australia persists in the surviving colonial groves even now.

Olives were introduced into South Australia in 1836 by the gifted amateur horticulturist, George Stevenson and possibly several others; by 1843 Stevenson listed 4 varieties growing in his garden in North Adelaide<sup>1</sup>. In 1839 John Bailey augmented these plants with another six<sup>2</sup>. And by about 1845, when he established his 'Hackney Nursery', Bailey had several other olive trees from William Macarthur's nursery at Camden Park in New South Wales<sup>3</sup>. The vigour of these dozen or so olive trees proved the 'adaptability' of the olive to the South Australian environment. However, given that at least some of these trees, including Stevensons', were seedlings, the fruit would have been small, tree yields low or highly variable and fertile trees difficult to propagate. By the early 1840s, olive promoters recognised the need for known, "good sorts" of olives.

In July 1844 the Directors of the South Australian Company resolved that "the [London] manager make enquiries as to the procuring [of] good olive trees and mulberry plants for South Australia"<sup>4</sup>. David McLaren, the London Manager, advised William Giles, the South Australian Manager, of the Board's decision:

The Board thinks that the climate of South Australia and most probably the soil will be found particularly favourable for the production of oil and silk.... We shall be happy to hear what progress is made on their cultivation and to know what facilities there are for procuring plants... it may be necessary to get them from the South of France.<sup>5</sup>

In fact the Company did not wait for Giles's reply and decided to source its olive stock from Robert Gowers and Company of Marseilles, shipping agents for the P&O Line<sup>6</sup>, the major shipping company servicing Australia and, therefore, a logical choice. On 13 September, the South Australian Company ordered "50 olive plants from Mess. R. Gowers to be forwarded to London properly packed in order to being sent to Mr Giles at the end of the year. Also a small specimen of different kinds of almond seed"<sup>7</sup> Gowers procured olive 'truncheons' of known, good varieties, from a number of reputable nurseries in the region. These were shipped from Marseilles, via London, to Adelaide in April 1845, arriving in July.

Unaware that the Company had already ordered the olive stock – he didn't receive this information until February<sup>8</sup> – in January 1845 Giles solicited the advice of George Stevenson, being "worthy of credit in these matters"<sup>9</sup>. Stevenson's subsequent memorandum enthused about the potential for olive cultivation in South Australia and recommended "that [the Company] should send to Provence both for the best mulberry and olive plants – a couple of hundred strongly rooted young trees packed carefully in boxes and forwarded so as to arrive here in May or June would be stock sufficient to

begin with....".<sup>10</sup> Quite independently, then, both the British and South Australian branches of the South Australian Company had identified southern France as the preferred source of olives for the colony.

In fact 51 olive trees survived the voyage; they arrived "in excellent condition"<sup>11</sup>. The five varieties were typically Provençal: 30 oliviers Salonnen, 17 oliviers Blanquet, 1 olivier Verdale, 2 oliviers Bouquettier, [and] 1 olivier Gros Redonnau<sup>12</sup>. Giles consigned these to John Bailey, the gifted professional nurseryman, to be planted in the Company's 'Park Farm', adjacent to the land that Giles had recently leased to Bailey for his "Hackney Nursery"<sup>13</sup>.

Ironically the South Australian Company forgot about their olive trees almost as soon as they were planted, merely acknowledging the occasional report from Giles or Bailey. More important matters diverted the Company's attention – the threat of Corn Law reform in England, the discovery of copper at Burra and elsewhere and the construction of the Port to Adelaide railway. Also about this time the Company sought to liquidate some of its more profitable assets by selling land to its tenants. So, when, in 1853, Bailey bought out his lease and adjacent blocks, he effectively purchased the olive trees and their progeny<sup>14</sup>.

Bailey was certainly skilled at propagating olives. When the nursery stock from the "Hackney Gardens" was auctioned, from May to August 1858, the catalogue listed over 17,000 olive trees<sup>15</sup>. These originated predominantly from the 51 French imports.

Moreover, all of these trees were eventually distributed and account for the major olive plantations in and around Adelaide. The groves of Davenport at Beaumont and

elsewhere, Simpson at Glen Osmond, Davis at Fulham, O'Halloran at O'Hallorans Hill, Everard at Ashford, and probably Thomas Hardy at Torrensville derived from Bailey's trees<sup>16</sup>. In 1864, Davenport, arguably the "father of the Australian olive industry", transplanted the surviving original French trees as an avenue at Gleeside, Beaumont<sup>17</sup>.

Similarly the Adelaide City Council used olive trees either from or propagated from Bailey's to re-vegetate the Parklands and city parks. As early as 1854 George Francis, the first Director of the Botanic Gardens, planted 'ornamental' olive trees in Brougham and Palmer Places in North Adelaide<sup>18</sup>. Two years later Bailey planted the grove at Mann Terrace in North Adelaide<sup>19</sup>. For the next twenty years the Council continued to plant olives around the city, from the Old Adelaide Goal in 1862 to the East Terrace plantations in the early 1870s. In 1875 the Council estimated that it had planted 30,000 olive trees, including about 6000 around the Old Adelaide Gaol<sup>20</sup>. Ten years later, Paolo Villanis, a Piedmontese vine and olive expert, inspected the Parkland olive groves on behalf of the Council: "I find that some of them have exactly the form and character of corresponding varieties cultivated in France", he reported, distinguishing four main varieties: "a small olive which in France is known as Franc Olivier", the "Olea angulosa de Gouan... very much cultivated at Montpellier", the "Cournaud, very much cultivated in the South of France" and "La Pointue"<sup>21</sup>. Although Villanis also identified several Spanish and Italian varieties, French varieties dominated.

Olive trees were, of course, imported from elsewhere. By 1886, Samuel Davenport claimed, "South Australia [had] become rich in the possession of olive stocks of reputation secured to her from Malaga, Gibraltar and Lisbon; from Cannes, Nice, and the south of France via Marseilles; and from Florence and Bari via Brindisi."<sup>22</sup> From as early

as the 1850s, olive cuttings had been introduced from Spain and Italy<sup>23</sup>. However, until well into the twentieth century – and with the one exception of Boothby's Lucca, imported in 1877 – these were not propagated or widely distributed. France remained the source of choice throughout the nineteenth century and trees of French extraction proliferated.

Samuel Davenport's selection of olive stock illustrates this preference for French varieties. As early as 1843 Davenport wrote to his father that he "intended to get if possible a number of olives from Montpellier [in the south of France] and a few from the varieties cultivated in New South Wales."<sup>24</sup>; not only did he write himself to "the south of France" but also asked his father to order on his behalf olives, almonds and also "the most approved books" from Gordon's and Parlier's at Montpellier<sup>25</sup>; Davenport did not, however, plant olives until at least 1852 and not seriously until 1864. However, throughout his long career as an olive producer, Davenport continued to favour French varieties.

From 1863 to 1883, Davenport is known to have imported 118 olive trees, including 42 varieties<sup>26</sup>. Of these, 86 trees and 29 varieties were from France. In 1870 Davenport estimated that he had 600 or 700 olive trees, "all of French varieties"<sup>27</sup>. It is not surprising then, that, in 1892, Davenport requested the newly appointed Government Viticulturist, Arthur Perkins, to bring olive trees with him from Tunisia and France; Perkins was unable to oblige but did arrange for olive cutting to be sent later from Montpellier.<sup>28</sup>

Davenport was hardly representative of early South Australian olive growers and it would be imprudent to assume that all producers shared his preference for French varieties.

Rather, during its period of growth from the 1870s to the 1890s, Davenport, his Company and his associates dominated the olive industry. His groves were amongst the largest olive plantations in South Australia; at the turn of the century they numbered an estimated 40,000 productive trees or more, over half of the total olive population of the colony, and, with the possible exception of the Stoneyfell grove, about 5 times the size of the next largest individual grove. And, through his practice of giving specimens to other nurseries to propagate as well as through his own nursery, Davenport's predominantly French olive trees spread widely throughout South Australia and the rest of the country.

Not only French varieties and trees but also French ideas and methods dominated the olive industry in the nineteenth century. Again Davenport illustrates this. "It is from France chiefly that I have any information on the olive"<sup>29</sup> he acknowledged in *Some New Industries for South Australia*, published in 1864 on his return from Britain and Europe. Davenport referred almost exclusively to France, French varieties, French olive nurseries, French cultivation and production methods and, most importantly, French reference books. The chapter on olives concludes with a list of recommended "books for reference on the olive", all of them French:

"Traité sur La Culture de l'Olivier", par "Barjavel", prix 4 francs; "Traité de l'Olivier", par "Amoureux," prix 5 francs; "L'Olivier, sa Culture et ses Produits" par "Raibaud L'Ange," prix 2 francs.<sup>30</sup>

He even provided details for a reliable bookseller in Marseilles. Elsewhere in *Some New Industries...* he cites two other sources: "Reynaud of Nîmes", presumably his *Guide pratique de la culture de l'olivier: son fruit et son huile*<sup>31</sup> and [Leydier's] *Maison Rustique*.

In his lecture to the South Australian Chamber of Manufactures on 19 July 1870, Davenport again cited only French sources and added two more: the Proceedings of the Central Society of Agriculture at Montpellier in 1852 and other writings of Louis-César Cazalis-Allut<sup>32</sup>. More than *Some New Industries...*, in one or another of its published forms<sup>33</sup> this address was highly influential, confirmed Davenport as an authority in his own right and thereby reinforced the pre-eminence of French ideas in local olive culture.

Like Davenport, most South Australian writers on olives relied heavily, even exclusively on French sources. In 1871, for example, Arthur Page translated portions of Alexis Riondet's *L'Olivier*<sup>34</sup> for his pamphlet on olives. And, second only in influence to Davenport's publications, William Boothby's *The Olive: Its Culture and Products in the South of France and Italy*, based on his visit to Europe in 1877, lists nine French 'authorities consulted' compared to two relatively minor Italian sources<sup>35</sup>.

In France:

Amoureux, P.J., on the Olive  
M. Couture, curé de Mirimas, on the Olive  
J.A. Risso, Natural History of Nice  
M. Reynaud, of Nimes, on the Culture of the Olive  
M. Gustave Henzé, Inspector-General of Agriculture, 1870 — Reports  
M.A. Riondet, Hyères District  
H. Raband, L'Ange, on the Olive  
A. Coutance, 1877, on the Olive  
Signor Giolo Cappi, 1875, on the Cultivation of the Olive

In Italy:

Dr. Bennett, Shores of the Mediterranean  
Reports—1876—on the Condition of Agricultural Products in Italy, by the  
Department of the Minister of Agriculture<sup>36</sup>

Of its 42 pages, 75% of Boothby's book was devoted to French olive culture.

Coincidentally Davenport was in Europe at the same time as Boothby — in fact they met at Brindisi. His 1877 notebook lists 31 books that he purchased on the trip, all of them French, most on viticulture but including several on general agricultural topics relevant to olive producers<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, in preparation to leave Tunisia to take up his position as South Australian Government Viticulturist and Viticultural Instructor in 1892, Arthur Perkins purchased reference books for the new Roseworthy Agricultural College; again these were all French, again mostly on viticulture but again several on general agriculture; he also subscribed to *Progrés Agricole*, *Messenger agricole du Midi*, *Journal d'Agriculture*, and *Anales Agronomiques*, all of which included articles on olive culture<sup>38</sup>. As Principal of Roseworthy (1904–1911) and especially as Director of Agriculture (1911–1936) Perkins indulged his personal and professional interest in olive culture<sup>39</sup>; perhaps not coincidentally, while he headed the Department of Agriculture, his staff invariably recommended French varieties, 'French' methods of propagation and pruning and so on.

Perkins was one of only two South Australians who could claim any formal training or substantial experience in olive culture. Chronologically the first was Paolo Villanis, a Piedmontese civil engineer and agriculturist. On Davenport's recommendation, Villanis emigrated to South Australia in 1881, was contracted by Davenport, Thomas Hardy, and others to supervise their vineyards and in 1883 by the Adelaide City Council to tend the Corporation's olive plantations<sup>40</sup>. Although Italian, Villanis appears to have been influenced by French olive practice. His list of "the best varieties of olives cultivated in France and Italy" included only French varieties<sup>41</sup>. And his monograph on olives, *The Cultivation of the Olive and the Methods of Making Olive Oil as recommended by the*

*best Italian and French Authors...*<sup>42</sup> is based on his experience in both Italy and France and refers equally to both French and Italian practices.

Perkin's credentials were more formal and unequivocally French. As well as "personal experience acquired in earlier years in Mediterranean countries, in which for many centuries the olive tree has proved a source of inexhaustible agricultural wealth."<sup>43</sup> Arthur Perkins was trained in agriculture at one of the foremost agricultural colleges in Europe. From 1887 to 1890 he studied at the *École Nationale d'Agriculture* at Montpellier, specialising in viticulture and oenology but gaining experience in the broad range of Mediterranean agriculture. After graduating he returned to Tunisia, at that time a French protectorate, to develop farms with cereals, cattle, vines, geraniums and eucalypts; his letters to Samuel Davenport indicate that he was also interested and experienced in olive culture<sup>44</sup>. In 1892 he was appointed Government Viticulturist and Instructor, affording Roseworthy College not only his viticultural knowledge but also his insights into an internationally recognised training centre. Not surprisingly, when Perkins re-visited Europe in 1910, his first and major stop was Montpellier<sup>45</sup>.

Leaders of the olive industry recognised the contribution made by trained practitioners such as Perkins and Villanis and tried to induce others to bring their skills to South Australia, particularly experienced agricultural labourers. As early as 1874, the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society considered "the advisability of importing laborers from France, skilled in Vine Culture, the making of Wine and Cognac Brandy, as well as those having a knowledge of the preparation for market of Olives, Raisins, Figs, Prunes, &c."<sup>46</sup>. The Emigration Agent in London, Francis Dutton, advised Samuel Davenport,

then President of the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society and also  
Commissioner of Crown Lands and Immigration, that he was

entirely mistaken in supposing that these classes of persons are now suffering from the combined ills of war and vine and silkworm disease. As a matter of fact all accounts from France agree that for a quarter of a century there have not been so exceptionally large harvests of all sorts, wine included, as France has this year been blest with, and that consequently the laboring classes in those districts are in anything but the pitiable condition Mr Davenport supposes; the French, moreover, are not an emigrating nation, ...[and] I should only be deluding you if I held out any hopes of these people being induced to emigrate to South Australia unless free passages and engagements guaranteed on arrival could be offered to them.<sup>47</sup>

According to anecdote, Davenport might have persuaded a small number of French vine and olive pruners to come to South Australia but only temporarily and without Government sponsorship. Plans to attract French vigneron and olive farmers as permanent settlers were completely unsuccessful.

Until the early twentieth century, the olive industry was influenced more by local olive and wine enthusiasts visiting Europe, and mostly the south of France, than by European visitors to Australia. The P&O Line's introduction of an Egyptian route to Australia and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated these nineteenth century study tours either *en route* to or *en retour* from Britain. Here again Samuel Davenport was the most frequent traveller, making five trips to England from 1850 to 1888, two of which included France and Italy: in 1863 after the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in Calcutta, and in 1877, after attending the Philadelphia Exhibition.

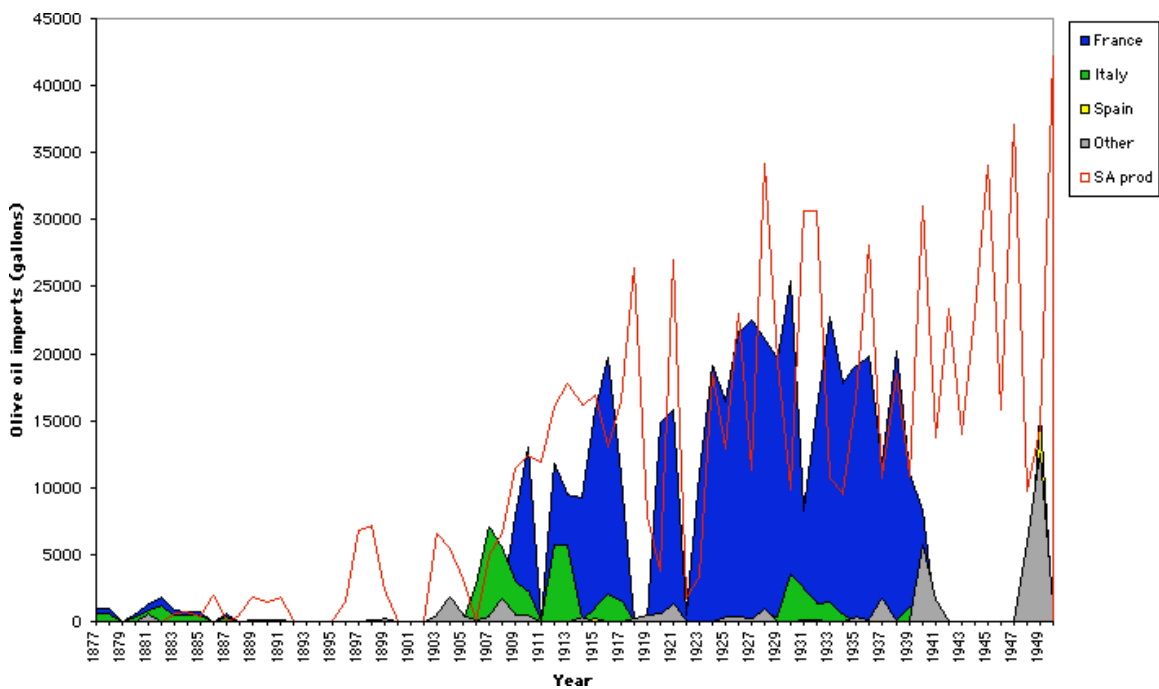
Fortunately we now have access to Davenport's diary and notebooks. He disembarked at Corfu on 24 May and arrived in Venice about 28 March from where he travelled relatively quickly across Northern Italy, reaching Genoa on 12 April, a total of 14 days in

Italy, most of them travelling or sight-seeing in Venice and Milan and only few in major olive growing areas. He arrived in France, at Mentone on 17 April and remained in the south of France for over a month, visiting Cannes, Marseilles, Tarasçon, Montpellier (twice), Cette, and Avignon before leaving from Lyon on 20 May for Geneva, Berne, Paris and London. This French sectors of this trip occupy more than three quarters of Davenport's notebook; it details meetings with expert wine-makers and olive producers, visits to groves and pressoirs and lavender distilleries, notes from books on olives, methods for pruning and shaping trees, orders for olive cuttings and other plants, sketches of presses and so on<sup>48</sup>. Boothby's tour and Davenport's second expedition, both in 1877, and Perkin's trip in 1910 demonstrate a reverence for the south of France as the premier olive growing region.

Such colonial encounters with the south of France illustrate the third and most persistent way in which French olive culture influenced the South Australian olive industry. For Davenport, Boothby, Perkins and others, the French olive industry represented the model for the type of industry they were trying to create and sustain. Until about 1910, France dominated world olive oil production and trade, at least statistically, and while the South Australian olive industry needed an archetype, France was the logical choice.

Consequently, as we have seen, until about the same time, local olive growers preferred French varieties to put in the ground and French methods by which to cultivate them and process their fruit. It was also the easier and more familiar option; the colonial squireocracy was more likely to read, write and speak French than Italian or Spanish; certainly Davenport, Boothby and Perkins did.

This pervasive French influence manifested in subtle but important ways. In particular, French olive oil defined the taste of olive oil for Australians until after the Second World War. Not only did French *négociants* dominate world trade in olive oil during the nineteenth century, French imports dominated the South Australian olive industry. The graph below charts olive oil imports by country of origin (France is the blue area) as well as estimated South Australian production (the red line) from 1870 to 1950. Two features are apparent; firstly, from about 1870 to the Second World War, South Australia imported about as much olive oil as it produced; because the graph includes only bulk olive oil, not bottled oil or 'salad' oil, the proportion of imported oil would have been significantly greater, perhaps by over 100%. Secondly, over this period, nearly 90% of imported oil originated in France (less than 8% from Italy, less than 1% each from Egypt, Greece and Turkey, less than 0.5% from Spain!).



Although local manufacturers protested that the local product was not adulterated with questionable imported olive oil, all of this would have been blended with (low quality) South Australian oil. Consequently, despite low consumption of olive oil, when South Australians did use olive oil in the kitchen, it was likely to be at least partially French oil. Not surprisingly, therefore, South Australians described the taste of good olive oil in terms that are regarded still as typically "French": soft, fruity, subtle and balanced rather than astringent, peppery, strong and structured, characteristics which are typically (Central) "Italian" and were considered to be defects. The French Mission to Australia in 1918 reported that "the excellence of [French] oil is not questioned."<sup>49</sup>; equally French olive oil represented excellence.

For the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, French olive culture set the mould for the local olive industry. South Australians failed, however, to be influenced in the one way that would have sustained the early olive industry: increased olive and olive oil consumption. Rather than as a general culinary fat, olive oil was used sparingly to grill fish and to dress salads, neither of which were common dishes until recently. During his trip in 1863 Davenport collected "French appetizers" and memorable meals, including some that included olives or olive oil:

- Preserved olives
- Anchovies in oil and vinaigre
- Radishes butter and ham
- Sausage
- Prawn, scalloped oysters and cuddlefish

- [?]
- Lemon with chops
- Lemon with fish
- Roast fowel [sic] with watercress

Fish with brown bread and butter<sup>50</sup>

For most Australians olives and olive oil remained at best a novelty, otherwise an unpalatable luxury. As Michael Simmons has suggested, it would be another century before significant numbers of affluent South Australians would have their own encounters with the south of France, French food and French olive oil.

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- 4 'Hackney Nursery, Adelaide', *The Adelaide Observer*, 3 May 1845; Mortlock Library, BRG  
5 42/37, South Australian Company, Letter, John Bailey to William Giles, 7 July 1846.
- 6 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/2, South Australian Company, Minutes of Board of Directors, 19 July  
7 1844.
- 8 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/27, South Australian Company, Letter, David McLaren to William  
9 Giles, London, 8 August 1844.
- 10 Private Collection, Samuel Davenport, Notebook, 1863-4.
- 11 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/2, South Australian Company, Minutes, 13 September 1844.
- 12 Mortlock Library, BRG42/27, South Australian Company, Letter, McLaren to Giles, 14 October  
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- 14 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/29, South Australian Company, Letter, William Giles to David  
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- 16 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/37, South Australian Company, George Stevenson on the Cultivation  
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- 17 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/9, Joseph Watts [Acting Manager] to David McLaren, Adelaide, 2  
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- 19 William Boothby, *The Olive, its Cultivation and Products...*, Adelaide, 1878. Also Samuel  
20 Davenport, *Cultivation of the Olive and Manufacture of its Fruit*, Adelaide, 1875.
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22 BRG 42/9, Joseph Watts [Acting Manager] to David McLaren, Adelaide, 2 August 1845
- 23 Mortlock Library, BRG 42/10, South Australian Company, Register of Company Lands, sect  
24 256, Hackney
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29 1875

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18 *and its people*, Adelaide, 1993, p.84

19 Barabara Best, *George Williuam Francis, first Director of the Adelaide Botanic Garden*,  
20 Adelaide, 1986, p.48–52

21 See, for example, State Records Office, GRG 24/6 1855/2505, Colonial Secretary's office to  
22 Town Clerk, 20 August 1855;  
23 *The South Australian Register*, 17 June 1875

24 Adelaide City Council, C15 798/1885, Letter, Paolo Villanis to Town Clerk, Adelaide, 31 March  
25 1885

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30 1842–49", *South Australiana*, 1966; letter 6 October 1843, Adelaide, p.41

31 B.S. Baldwin (ed.), "Letters of Samuel Davenport, Chiefly to his Father, George Davenport,  
32 1842–49", *South Australiana*, 1966; letter 21 October 1843, Adelaide, p.43; letter 2 December  
33 1843, Macclesfield, p.54

34 Private Collection, Samuel Davenport, Notebook, 1863-64, 1877–8

35 *The South Australian Register*, 20 July 1870

36 Jeff Daniels (ed), *The Personal Letterbooks of Professor A.J. Perkins*, Roseworthy, 1982

37 Samuel Davenport, *Some New Industries for South Australia*, Adelaide, 1864, p.7

38 Samuel Davenport, *Some New Industries for South Australia*, Adelaide, 1864, p.22

39 Joseph Reynaud, *Guide pratique de la culture de l'olivier: son fruit et son huile*, Nîmes, 1863

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41 ***The South Australian Register*, 20 July 1870**

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43 *Olive*, np, nd; Alexis Riondet, *L'Olivier*, Paris, 1867

44 William Boothby, *The Olive in the South of France and Italy*, Adelaide, 1878

45 William Boothby, *The Olive in the South of France and Italy*, Adelaide, 1878, p.[43]

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See, for example, A. J. Perkins, "On the Scope in South Australia for the Extension of Olive  
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