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Education and Journalism in Nineteenth Century Charters Towers

Glenn A. Davies



The colonial editor enjoyed a privileged position in nineteenth century Queensland, and through the newspaper editorial provided a regular social and political commentary. An analysis of the character and influences of an editor provides valuable insights into the forces that shaped the community and, at times, the colony. In the second half of the nineteenth century a popular vocation for many men with at least a passing education was journalism. Their creative spirits were to find an outlet in the plethora of provincial papers. In this whirlwind of journals, papers, and issues, it was Thadeus O'Kane of Charters Towers who stood head and shoulders above his scribbler peers. O'Kane was to be an inspiration to his colonial colleagues as a provincial catalyst for polemical discussions on the many popular political and social treatises and ideas of the late nineteenth century.

Newspapers flourished and died in considerable numbers in Charters Towers. The *Northern Miner* was the first to appear — on the gold field in 1872 — and was to outlive all its competitors. It still survives, and its influence bears witness to the boast of the colony's leading journal, *The Queenslander*, that 'a grogshop, a church and a gaol constitute a town, but a newspaper makes a city'.¹

When Thadeus O'Kane took over the editorship of the *Northern Miner* in 1873, Charters Towers was still a frontier town of bark huts and canvas tents. The gold field spawned the 'new rich', many of whom were dazzled by the possession of wealth, which, although modest, exceeded their wildest dreams. Destitute of education and cultural capital, they plunged wildly into the excitement of gambling and betting.

If any paper was recognisably the voice of Charters Towers it was the *Northern Miner*. Long before the town won the dignity of incorporation as a city, the *Northern Miner* had subsided into respectable middle age. O'Kane was intimately involved in the process of establishing a community: as the gold

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field evolved from mining camp to thriving town, O'Kane's influence on the educational development of his readers was unparalleled in northern Australia.

In *A History of Australian Literature*, Green emphasised the centrality of the newspaper to colonial culture and during the seventeen years he occupied the editorial perch of the *Northern Miner* O'Kane was a significant performer in the organisation of local opinion and ideology.² The provincial press played a pivotal part in the progress of the protean politics of north Queensland. The manner in which Queensland was settled, and the difficulty of communications between the scattered settlements, were responsible for the emergence of an extremely strong sense of local consciousness. This was fostered by the establishment of local newspapers and journals, which reflected the perceptions and attitudes of the settlement which supported them and, not infrequently, led their settlements in the creation of those perceptions and attitudes. While local newspapers and journals fostered a sense of separateness, they tended to counterbalance this by breaking down isolation, by bringing news to the settlement from elsewhere in the extensive colony, and by educating their readers to the political and religious theories of the day.

Denis Cryle has recently argued that the instability of colonial newspapers did not deter their provision of a systematic discussion of issues. Indeed:

The strategic importance of the press as a vehicle for ideas and a medium of political organisation cannot be overemphasized.³

To the extent that it announced social formations and political pressure groups, the press permitted valuable insights into colonial Queensland society. One distinctive aspect of nineteenth century editors was a polemical tradition which operated simultaneously against government officials and other newspapers editors.

When Thadeus O'Kane arrived at Charters Towers he was, at fifty-three, one of the oldest men on the goldfield. He obtained a half-share in the *Northern Miner*, and on 12 January 1874 became sole proprietor. Apart from his attempts at a political career, the *Northern Miner* was to be O'Kane's main interest until his forced retirement on medical grounds just before his seventieth birthday:

...for the seventeen years until his death in 1890 the history of the *Northern Miner* was very much a history of Thadeus O'Kane with his influence extending far beyond the boundaries of Charters Towers.⁴

According to one description, O'Kane was a spare, grizzled man, of middle height, soft and cultured in speech, and with all the little touches of the public school and university.⁵ One of the most educated and cultured men on the field, for almost two decades O'Kane was the conscience of the goldfield, the self-appointed scourge of its offenders. When O'Kane died in early 1890 most major newspapers in every colony carried obituaries, and their general tenor was that something unique was gone from Australian journalism. The *Northern Miner*, of which O'Kane was the sole owner, had become the leading journal

in Charters Towers, which, by 1890, had a population of about nineteen thousand, and had become the leading mining centre in Queensland. O'Kane was intimately connected with the history of the city during its rise and heyday, and his activities are well-documented, not least through court records of the numerous occasions on which he was sued for libel. From his vantage point as editor of the oldest newspaper on the goldfield he documented follies and greeds, and he paid for it.

His eye was ever on the alert for an affront to himself or his public morals. It was a keen, aggressive, Irish eye. And his pen was vitriolic. Of course, he was 'agin' the Government, but more particularly against all persons in authority, and every issue of the 'Miner' revealed the wickedness and incompetence of Charters Towers officialdom - that is, as Mr. Thaddeus [sic] O'Kane saw it.⁶

As an editor, O'Kane was a persuasive advocate of republicanism, the Liberal Party, separation, Irish home rule, mining development, and miners' safety.⁷

Thaddeus O'Kane, the rambunctious Irishman, was to devote his life to improving conditions on the gold fields of Charters Towers, with the *Northern Miner* providing a far-reaching soap box for his message. O'Kane's involvement with the *Northern Miner* was a classic example of the right man being in the right place at the right time. The miners had found a man to champion their causes. The emerging establishment had found a critic who could not be muzzled. Boycotts were imposed, numerous libel actions were brought, but Thaddeus O'Kane continued unabated and unrepentant.

O'Kane also prided himself on his literary tastes. He claimed to keep Homer, Tacitus, and Horace on his desk at all times; took considerable pride in the fact that he was 'a first-class prizeman of Maynooth', and claimed that he was responsible for the introduction to the School of Arts library of Tindal, Darwin, Huxley, Colenso, and others.⁸ Indeed, during his political campaign of 1883, O'Kane was promoted as 'The Champion of Free Secular and Compulsory Education'.⁹ He was also a prominent member of the Boards of the School of Arts, and the State School, and was largely responsible for establishing a School of Mines in Charters Towers.¹⁰

The *Northern Miner* published and discussed extracts from the works of many contemporary and canonical authors, including Alfred Russell Wallace, John Milton and Henry George.¹¹ The frequent discussion in the *Northern Miner* of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, reflected O'Kane's preoccupation with land taxation arising from his experiences in Ireland.¹² In the 1880s, O'Kane ran columns entitled 'Aesthetics', which dealt with such esoteric topics as the defence of Latin, and an 'Independent Column', which brought to the miners' notice such diverse figures as John Stuart Mill and his 'On Liberty', the poet Henry Kendall, the theologian Joseph Cook and the humanitarian Florence Nightingale.¹³

Politically, O'Kane was in the British liberal tradition and supported the liberal faction in Queensland politics. He was vociferously xenophobic, but, as early as 1885, favoured female emancipation.¹⁴ The excesses of the latter

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day Fenians disgusted him, for violence, outside the spoken word, was never his metier.¹⁵ Indeed, O'Kane attracted considerable criticism for his refusal to endorse the strike action of the unions in the Newcastle strikes in 1889. In a *Northern Miner* leader in 1889, he advocated education rather than strike action as the means for reconciling capital and labour.¹⁶

As an avid supporter of national education, O'Kane denounced the sectarian hatred that pervaded the colony as a whole.¹⁷ This hatred of religious extremism was typical of most people in Charters Towers: they refused to accept the imposition of puritan ideals and sectarianism upon the community by zealous Christian minorities. Temperance, anti-gambling sentiment, and Sabbatarianism were anathema in a society where life was primarily a drive towards increased material prosperity, and physical comfort and pleasure. Plainly, religion in Charters Towers had fallen under the dominion of a secular mentality.

The ordinary people of Charters Towers knew something of the Darwinian thesis, and of other theories which cast serious doubt upon the basic principles of the Christian religion. However, their knowledge came not from reading the original treatises for themselves, and then discriminately internalising them into their system of beliefs. Rather, they were more likely to gain a piecemeal comprehension of these theories through the almost daily tirades in the *Northern Miner*. These tirades conceptualised religion as a corrupt and hollow misrepresentation of Christ's example and teachings, ultimately relegated to worthlessness by the scientific approach of Darwin and his contemporaries.¹⁸ The community was also exposed to O'Kane's frequent secular reappraisals of the nature of man and religion in public lectures, particularly those sponsored by the Freethinker group and the Secular Association.¹⁹ Both their scheduled time of meeting on Sunday mornings, and their topics of interest, suggested the 'Godless' orientations of these Associations and of a substantial component of the community.²⁰

Although such ideas, probably accepted relatively uncritically by many people in Charters Towers, did not serve specifically to make the community secular, they did however lend substantial theoretical justification to those citizens who had come to place little store on the Church in their lives. Keith Rayner contends that it was through such methods as the press and lectures that

the diffused ideas emanating from the scholars became to the popular mind simple statements, such as that man was descended from the apes and that the Bible was untrue.²¹

To gain any attention from a capital over one thousand miles away to the south the diggers of Charters Towers needed a public forum for education in the important issues of the day. Throughout the nineteenth century the only available medium was the newspaper and Thadeus O'Kane thus became an influential educator during the 1870s and 1880s. For all but the first of those eighteen years he owned and edited the *Northern Miner*. It was his voice — sardonic, critical, sometimes erratic, but always independent — that made the

paper a byword throughout Australia. The *Northern Miner* was responsible for the education of a generation of Queenslanders in the popular political and secular treatises and ideas of the late nineteenth century. In O'Kane's own words:

We look over [our enemies'] heads with steadfast eyes to the single purpose of our life, to rouse up the people to their true and rightful place in God's earth, to break the chains of ignorance and superstition which have hitherto held them in miserable bondage.²²

In this he succeeded admirably.

Endnotes

- 1 *Queenslander*, 10 March 1866.
- 2 H.M. Green. *A History of Australian Literature* Vol 1. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961), 124. See also R. Kirkpatrick, *Sworn to No Master* (Toowoomba: Darling Downs Institute Press, 1984), 272; J. Manion, *Paper Power in North Queensland* (Townsville: North Queensland Newspaper, 1982) 14.
- 3 D. Cryle, *The Press in Colonial Queensland: A Social and Political History 1845-1875* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989) 2.
- 4 Manion, *Paper Power in North Queensland*, 149.
- 5 R.S. Browne, *A Journalist's Memories* (Brisbane: The Read Press, 1927), 5.
- 6 Browne, *A Journalist's Memories*, 5.
- 7 J. Stoodley & H.J. Gibbney, 'Thadeus O'Kane' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol. 5 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1974), 362.
- 8 *Northern Miner*, 26 February 1880.
- 9 Manion, 228.
- 10 Kirkpatrick, *Sworn to No Master*, 279.
- 11 *Northern Miner*, 20 November 1883; 29 November 1883; 14 March 1882; 19 June 1884.
- 12 *Northern Miner*, 2 July 1881; 22 June 1882; 22 July 1882; 11 January 1883; 19 & 30 November 1883; 13 December 1883 & 8 September 1885.
- 13 *Northern Miner*, 4 March 1880; 1 August 1882; 21 September 1882; 14 & 26 October 1882; 16 December 1882 & 20 January 1883.
- 14 *Northern Miner*, 25 July 1885.
- 15 *Northern Miner*, 12 May 1883 & 1 December 1883.
- 16 *Northern Miner*, 22 February 1889.
- 17 S. Hayston, 'Interaction of Religion and Society in Charters Towers 1872-1900' B.Ed-BA Honours dissertation, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1976, 110.
- 18 Hayston, 129.
- 19 *Northern Miner*, 29 November 1886; 19 September 1890.
- 20 *Northern Miner*, 29 November 1886; 22 August 1887 & 19 September 1890.
- 21 K. Rayner, 'The History of the Church of England in Queensland' Ph.D.dissertation, University of Queensland, 1962, 402.
- 22 *Northern Miner*, 16 August 1881. See also Leader, *Northern Miner*, 2 May 1882.