Too remote, too primitive and too expensive: Scandinavian settlers in colonial Queensland

The defining feature of colonial Queensland was its high immigrant population. In a concerted effort to populate the land with European settlers, Queensland's colonial administrators had enacted a pioneering immigration policy between 1860 and 1901, which enabled Queensland to claim the highest percentage of foreign-born residents of all the Australian colonies in 1891. As well as the multitude of English, Irish, Scottish and German settlers that arrived in the late-nineteenth century to take up governmental offers of open land through assisted passage schemes, there was also a significant Scandinavian element that called Queensland home. At its recorded peak in the 1886 census, some 5,756 Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Finns had settled in "Sunney Queensland", and these numbers would remain high until the outbreak of World War I.²

Queensland and the Scandinavian diaspora

The Scandinavians that arrived in Queensland were part of a much larger diaspora that had its beginnings as early as 1825, when the first pioneering groups of Norwegian migrants left for new homes in the United States of America.³ While the reasons for Scandinavian emigration were complex, the majority of these migrants were economic in focus; that is, they eschewed an underdeveloped, overpopulated, poverty-stricken Scandinavia and instead sought new opportunities in the flourishing settler societies of the United States, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia. Over the next century, over 2.8 million people emigrated from their Nordic homelands in search of a better life overseas.⁴ According to Olavi Koivukangas, more than 95% of these Scandinavian overseas emigrants went to the United States, because, as Marcus Lee Hansen wrote, Australia was "too remote from Europe, too primitive a region and too expensive to reach. By contrast, those who sought the United States prospered, soon developing flourishing communities". Despite this, many adventurous migrants still saw Australia as a potential place for resettlement, especially after gold discoveries in Victoria and Queensland in the 1850s erroneously advertised the colonies as an easy place to make one's fortune. Ellen Paulsen notes that Australia became a more hospitable choice for Scandinavians later in the nineteenth century, once influenced by the accounts of explorers and scientists visiting Australian shores, such as Swedish naturalist Erik Mjöberg and Norwegian zoologist Carl Lumholtz.⁶

¹ Duncan Waterson and Maurice French, *From the Frontier: A Pictorial History of Queensland to 1920*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1987, p. 4.

² 'Scandinavian Immigration and Settlement in Australia before World War II' PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 1972, published as a monograph, Turku, Institute for Migration, 1974, p. 113.

³ Byron J. Nordstrom, *Scandinavia since 1500*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 232. ⁴ Koivukangas, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58; Marcus Lee Hansen, with Arthur Meier Schlesinger (ed.), *The Atlantic Migration*, 1607-1860: A *History of the Continuing Settlement of the United States*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1945, p. 138.

⁶ Ellen Paulsen, 'Scandinavians in Queensland,' in M. Brandle and S. Karas (eds), *Multicultural Queensland: The People and Communities of Queensland*, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, Kangaroo Point, QLD, 1988, p. 195.

Why Queensland?

Prior to Federation, Queensland's financial emphasis upon assisted passage schemes for non-British settlers in particular – mainly Germans and Scandinavians – was quite beneficial in encouraging newcomers to land in Queensland ports rather than the southern colonies.⁷ According to W. D. Borrie, "Queensland... was the only state to make any serious attempt to glean the migrant market in [continental] Europe", 8 and was pro-active in drawing northern European migrants through such assisted migration programs. Fredrik Larsen Lund notes that some 114,000 European migrants arrived in Queensland between 1860 and 1878, with approximately 85% receiving some form of financial assistance from the Queensland Government to pay for fares. Non-British migrants, especially Germans, made good use of free or lessened fares throughout the 1870s and 1880s, and the Queensland government disseminated large amounts of information in Scandinavia as well, posting advertisements in Scandinavian newspapers by way of the agent-general in London, as well as circulating thousands of booklets to inform the Nordic populace of Queensland's boundless opportunities.¹⁰ However, prospective immigrants, often drawn from poverty and servitude, were still quite unprepared and lacking vital knowledge of what to expect upon arrival. As Danish carpenter, Thorvald Weitemeyer, noted of his voyage from Hamburg in 1871:

What a motley crew we were: Germans, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, a Russian Finn, and an Icelander. There were many nationalities, but in the majority of cases extreme poverty was evident in their dress and stamped upon their faces, and it was easy to see that the same spirit of recklessness which filled me had somehow also been instilled into them. Nearly everybody had guns, revolvers, and knives, which were promptly taken from us as we stepped on board... None of us knew anything about Queensland, and many were the surmises and guesses at what the country was like and what we were going to do there.¹¹

Mapping Scandinavian Queensland

In terms of Australian settlement, by the 1870s Queensland had become the prime focus of many of these Scandinavian sojourners. Following the arrival of the first assisted Scandinavian contingent to Maryborough in August 1871, immigrant numbers increased at an astonishing rate.¹² In the decade between 1871 and 1881, the Scandinavian population of

⁷ Maximilian Brändle and Steve Karas, 'Introduction' in Maximilian Brändle and Steve Karas (eds) *Multicultural Queensland: The People and Communities of Queensland*, Kangaroo Point, Qld, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, 1988, p. 6.

⁸ W. D. Borrie, *Population Trends and Policies: A Study in Australian and World Demography*. Sydney, Australasian Pub. Co., 1948, p. 36, cited in Ronald Lawson, *Brisbane in the 1890's: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*, St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 1973, p. 20.

⁹ Fredrik Larsen Lund, 'You May Well Become Slaves: On the Fringes of Queensland's Assisted Migration Scheme', *Queensland History Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 11, November 2012, p. 719.

¹⁰ Olavi Koivukangas and John Stanley Martin, *The Scandinavians in Australia*, Melbourne, AE Press, 1986, p. 69.

¹¹ Thorvald Weitemeyer, *Missing Friends: Being the Adventures of a Danish Emigrant in Queensland* (1871-1880), London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1892, pp. 19, 23.

¹² Koivukangas, op. cit., p. 115.

Queensland more than trebled from 936 persons to 3,278, and only four years later in 1886, numbers had increased five-fold to peak at 5,756.¹³

On arriving in Queensland, new immigrants disembarked at several of the main ports, including Brisbane, Maryborough, Mackay, Bundaberg and Townsville, where they were lodged in immigration depots before gaining employment and then "being broadcast over the Coastal Belt and Darling Downs". 14 By 1901, Queensland was home to more than half the Danish population of Australia, with some 3,138 Danes residing in the state. While New South Wales and Victoria were home to the majority of Swedes and Norwegians, roughly a quarter called Queensland home, with 2,142 combined. 15 From these figures, it can be seen that a large proportion of those Scandinavians reaching Australia at this time came directly to Queensland, a place which at the time was not as developed, nor as enticing as the large colonial cities of the southern states. With most of Queensland's Scandinavians being of rural and agricultural origin – and often destitute, requiring assistance to make the journey – they were particularly suited to taking up the government's offer of land, eventually selecting plots and forming small farming settlements in the pioneering south-east corner of the state, particularly near Bundaberg, Mackay, Nikenbah, Pialba, Tiaro, Tinana, Kingaroy and Laidley. 16 Other skilled migrants remained in the towns as craftsmen or traders, while many others became involved in mining, settling in substantial numbers near the goldfields of Charters Towers, Gympie, Mount Morgan and the Palmer River.¹⁷

The development of multiethnic Queensland

According to Ronald Lawson, by 1891 Queensland had the largest proportion of non-British in its population than any other Australian colony, most strongly represented by the Germans and Scandinavians who made up 2.1% and 1.1% of the metropolitan population respectively. As a result, Queensland was inclined to be a much more multiethnic state than its southerly counterparts, and this enabled some contemporary observers to comment on the viability of ethnic community maintenance rather than pander to growing 'British-Australian' assimilation pressures. As early as 1907, Melbourne-based Danish immigrant, newspaper editor and historian, Jens Lyng, opined that Queensland, rather than the southern states, was particularly advantageous to Nordic community-building processes. While still in small numbers, Lyng posited that only in Queensland and New Zealand were there adequate concentrations of rural Scandinavians to enable a similar style of cultural maintenance as was being experienced by the more numerous German-Australian communities. "Where we find one Scandinavian farmer in Victoria, Tasmania, or New South Wales," wrote Lyng, "we find a dozen in Queensland or New Zealand, and over 100 in the United States". Lyng was

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁴ Jens Lyng, 'Scandinavian Settlement in Queensland: IV, A Troubled Beginning', *Norden*, 27 June 1931, p. 5.

¹⁵ Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁶ Lyng, 'Scandinavian Settlement in Queensland', op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁷ Koivukangas, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

¹⁸ Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Jens Lyng and O. N. Nelson, *History of the Scandinavians in Australasia*, Melbourne, West Melbourne Printing Works, 1907, p. 39.

²⁰ Ibid.

insistent that the clusters of Scandinavian Farmers near Mackay, Bundaberg, Maryborough and Warwick, and the large number of Danish settlers in south-east Queensland as a whole – around 3,156 in 1901, compared to only 1,366 in New South Wales and 1,020 in Victoria – would allow their own cultural practices and traditions to flourish inter-generationally. Pioneering Queensland, it seemed, was involved in a wider social experiment in adapting the 'hardy Norseman' to the trials of the Australian scrub while aiding in the state's economic development, but not at the expense of abandoning their cultural differences. Another settler, who wrote to Lyng in 1901, noted the prosperous migrant communities that grew in the farming hinterlands of south-east Queensland:

I was one of the Danes who in 1875 selected land in the Pialba district. We were upwards of forty Scandinavian families, and more arrived later. Most of these early settlers are there still. The dense forest has disappeared, and the district presents a beautiful landscape covered with luxuriant fields of maize, sugar plantations, and vinyards. – In the Mary valley are many Scandinavian farmers of whom several are orchardists and wine growers on a large scale.²²

The growth of Queensland's Scandinavian clubs and societies

Between 1870 and 1890, this strong flow of northern European migrants would enable vibrant social organisations to grow and potential ethnic communities develop in colonial Queensland. In many ways Lyng was correct; the large concentrations of Scandinavians in Queensland towns and farming communities did, at least for a time, encourage widespread cultural and social activity amongst migrants keen to reconnect with others from their ancestral homelands.

The 1870s marked the beginning of a period of increased numbers of both migrants and so-called 'Scandinavian' associations, starting with establishment of the Scandinavian Association *Heimdal* in Brisbane in September 1872.²³ These early associations grew from the desire for migrants to join forces under the practical umbrella of pan-Scandinavianism, to promote an environment of friendship, co-operation, support and social welfare for migrants of all three nationalities. They also mirrored the experiences of those migrants who had arrived in the United States between 1840 and 1890, where the early years of mass migration had seen concerted efforts to create a sense of pan-Scandinavian ethnic identity within North American communities due to relatively small numbers of Scandinavian immigrants, and the natural tendency for Danes, Norwegians and Swedes to seek each other out in an unknown and alien society.²⁴ Across Queensland, the influx of assisted migrants from 1871 onwards allowed for the formation of Scandinavian associations in the migrant-laden townships of Maryborough (1871/72), Rockhampton (1873), and Charters Towers (1880s).²⁵ Often

²² Lyng, 'Scandinavian Settlement in Queensland', op. cit., p. 6.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²³ Koivukangas, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-118.

²⁴ Dag Blanck, 'Friends and Neighbors: Patterns of Norwegian-Swedish Interaction in the United States', in Philip J Anderson and Dag Blanck (eds), *Norwegians and Swedes in the United States: Friends and Neighbors*, St Paul, MN, Minnesota Historical Press, 2012, p. 7.

²⁵ Koivukangas, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.

beginning as friendly societies to provide sickness benefits to members, most of these early Scandinavian societies evolved into social associations after realising their inability to compete with larger Australian benefit funds.²⁶ In this newly adapted social role, the associations of Queensland enjoyed a high level of membership for a brief period, with Maryborough and Charters Towers maintaining approximately 60 and 40 members, respectively, at their peak in the late 1880s.²⁷ Unfortunately, the very fluid nature of Queensland's migrants – continually searching for viable economic opportunities – meant that many of these organisations could not rely on a stable membership base. The shifting employment opportunities within the gold-mining communities of Rockhampton and Charters Towers in particular hampered Scandinavian societies' growth as members were forced to move into and out of the region.

The Scandinavian societies of Queensland were still very influential in establishing a sense of community between migrants, and enabling them to come together for social events. The clubs were an interesting development, a rallying point for the colonies' immigrant population. Brisbane in particular was home to Heimdal, an organisation strong enough to link to other Scandinavian clubs interstate and maintain connection to the colonies' important mouthpiece, Melbourne's Scandinavian newspaper Norden. In 1882, Danish cabinet-maker Peter Thomle introduced the sport of target birdshooting (Fugleskydning) to Queensland, where it was taken up as an important migrant social event and spread to other colonial centres.²⁸ In March 1898, *Norden* brought news of Brisbane's annual *Fugleskydning*, held at a Mr Sørensen's property, Mt. Gotha, to the attention of the wider Scandinavian readership as a demonstration of what could be achieved socially by the migrant community: "It was a good muster of members, and the atmosphere was animated",29 wrote the Norden correspondent. Describing the masses of flags and pennants amongst the happy Scandinavians and their "mighty eagle", Norden painted an impressive picture of Brisbane's migrants coming together to recreate the culture of their past while connecting both rural and urban migrants.³⁰ As well as this, the metropolitan migrants who were able to frequent these clubs were often involved in picnics, masquerade balls and parties. On 23 May 1899, for example, a complementary benefit concert and ball was arranged in the Brisbane Trades Hall to commemorate Norden's third anniversary, being orchestrated by the Scandinavian Association Heimdal and the Consuls of both Denmark and Sweden/Norway. 31

Scandinavian Church organisations

Many of Queensland's small Scandinavian communities also desired their own Lutheran Church services in order to appease migrant needs of spiritual fulfilment and abate feelings of guilt and homesickness. Administering to such a fragmented flock was, however, difficult for the few Scandinavian ministers present in Queensland in the 1870s and 1880s – most were

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ 'Under the Southern Cross', Norden, 9 March 1918, p. 5.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ 'A Complimentary Benefit Concert & Ball Tendered to the Australian-Scandinavian Journal Norden', *Norden*, April 1899, p. 5.

missionaries, and therefore often unable or unwilling to stay in one community as they tried to spread the word of god to as many dispersed settlers as possible. When no ordained Scandinavian Lutheran ministers were available, a group of lay preachers administered over half a dozen small congregations in Brisbane, Mackay, Maryborough, Nikenbah, Tiaro, and Tinana. According to Lyng, the situation was dire and, while "non-descript lay-preachers plodded wearily on, to the best of their ability heartening the dispirited Scandinavian Christians... the Scandinavian congregations in Queensland had become a disjointed collection of small, leaderless, groping units". Unable to procure more ministers from Scandinavia, many migrants simply began to accept the ministrations of other protestant denominations, in order to gain more regular and stable guidance.

Forced to seek religious refuge amongst the larger German congregations, the uniting sentiments of Lutheranism enabled church congregations drawn from various nationalities to be considered, and fill the void left by a lack of Scandinavian Pastors. In fact, many Scandinavian congregations often arose as offshoots from German groups, by Scandinavian preachers already involved and employed in the larger German Church. Pastor C. Gaustad, for example, who had trained in Norway and Germany, came to Brisbane to administer to German migrants in 1869 but soon was preaching in Norwegian to Scandinavian groups within the German church. After relocating to Mackay, Gaustad was intent on fostering a united Lutheran identity, and created a combined German-Scandinavian parish there.³⁴ Transnational Lutheranism was particularly strengthened in Queensland with the creation of the United German and Scandinavian Lutheran Synod of Queensland in 1885. However, friction within such 'united' church groups - especially as many Danish members shared strong anti-German sentiments due to the Dano-Germanic conflicts of the 1860s undermined their efficacy, and by 1889, only four years after its establishment, the Scandinavian congregation had severed its ties to become an independent synod.³⁵ With the dissolution of the United German and Scandinavian Lutheran Synod of Queensland and the departure of its overworked and ill mastermind, Pastor C. Petersen, back to Denmark in 1889, Lyng posits this as the end of a united Scandinavian Church in Queensland. "The story of the next decade," wrote Lyng "is one of decay - of disintegrating congregations - of Scandinavian churches disposed of or standing empty". 36

Criticisms of Assisted Scandinavian Immigration

Bolstering the numbers of Scandinavian settlers to enter Australia during the 1870s to 1920s and maintaining such ideas of viable ethnic communities was, as noted above, difficult. Scandinavian migration patterns reflected opportunities that were largely dictated by the supply and demand of Australian immigration policies, which were in turn bound up with climactic and economic conditions. Consequently, immigration boomed and busted along

³² Koivukangas and Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³³ MS, Lutheran Archives of Australia: Jens Lyng, 'Scandinavian-Lutheran Church Work in Queensland', in *Scandinavian Congregations: Scandinavian Pastor Information*, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

³⁶ MS, Lutheran Archives of Australia: Jens Lyng, 'Scandinavian-Lutheran Church Work in Queensland', in *Scandinavian Congregations: Scandinavian Pastor Information*, pp. 3-4.

with the land-based economy, and this had startling repercussions for those attempting to rekindle past connections through chain migration and community renewal. Assisted passages in Queensland, for example, were offered during the 1870s and 1880s, abandoned in 1892, and revived again in 1897.³⁷ Until 1890, immigration was largely regulated by conditions in the originating homelands and in Queensland itself, and as a result each slight trade depression was reflected in a similar lowering in immigration rates. Lawson describes a "stop-go" pattern of immigration that continued into the 1890s, and as Queensland's economic conditions deteriorated rapidly in times of depression, the number of total assisted migrants was also reduced, from a total of 9,170 in 1888 to 2,919 in 1891.³⁸ The severe drought and depression in 1892 caused assisted migration to be suspended in March of that year, and was not resumed, in smaller numbers than previously, until much later in the decade.³⁹ Remarkably, during a small window of revived assisted passages between 1898 and 1901 more than 1,000 new Scandinavians took the chance to immigrate, however, the Queensland government was hardly able to support these new arrivals due to ongoing economic difficulties.⁴⁰

Despite their best efforts at attracting northern European migrants of a similar level to those in America, the Queensland government also faced significant difficulties in promoting their colony to an uninformed and wary Nordic population. The largest, according to Koivukangas, was the simple lack of immigrant knowledge about Queensland in Scandinavia. Many later immigration agents were asked by prospective immigrants whether they would become slaves on arrival, or be pressed into fighting for the British army against the Boers instead of going to the Australian colony. 41 To complicate matters, Queensland's harsh and hot environment was deemed difficult for such migrants to endure.⁴² Consequently, many Scandinavian immigrants were seen to make use of the assisted passage program to gain entry to Australia, but then migrated internally to southern states shortly after arrival.⁴³ According to P. B. Hansen, living conditions in Queensland became particularly severe, and even the already established Scandinavians left Brisbane for Southern cities, seeking opportunities elsewhere. 44 Furthermore, unfavourable reports from unsuccessful and unhappy migrants began to appear in the Scandinavian press, as the Nordic governments attempted to stem the excessive emigration of their citizens at a time of rapid late industrialisation. As a result of this negative backlash and generally poor results, the assisted migration program was eventually scrapped in 1901, and later emigrants were required to pay the full fare.

Immigration, Federation, and Homogenisation

³⁷ Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 69.

³⁸ Lawson, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³⁹ Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 72

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Koivukangas, op. cit., p. 127.

⁴¹ Koivukangas, op. cit., p. 124.

⁴² Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 73.

⁴³ *Ibid*.: Lund, *op. cit.*, p. 728.

⁴⁴ P. B. Hansen, *The Danish Association Heimdal's History 1872-1972*, Brisbane, Danish Association Heimdal, 1972, p. 5.

The assisted passage schemes were eventually handed over as part of the Commonwealth's responsibilities in 1901.⁴⁵ As Michael Roe infers however, the handover was anything but simple; the all-important exclusion of undesirable aliens was a major object of early Commonwealth legislation, yet "other immigration matters remained in constitutional limbo, the Commonwealth having ultimate power but the states jealously retaining their de facto control". 46 Between 1906 and 1912, most states once again became enthusiastic towards assisted migration schemes, and national numbers peaked in 1912 with 92,000 immigrants; however over 90% were British and approximately half were assisted.⁴⁷ By 1920, Empire Migration schemes were also attempted; however issues of state control and funding constantly undermined their efficacy and caused many to fail terribly. 48 As such, into the twentieth century most migration settlement schemes were explicitly designed to strengthen British migration and development throughout a racially and culturally homogenised Australian nation, and rarely did they include provisions for Nordic migrants, who were required to self-fund their journeys.⁴⁹ Still, it is important to note that Scandinavians remained one of the largest groups to enter Queensland during the late-nineteenth century but, because of these developments, their numbers slowly diminished for much of the early twentieth century. By 1925, the Scandinavian Diaspora was coming to an end, and only a small trickle of Nordic migrants would follow in the ensuing decades. Numbers would only begin to increase again after the 1980s, following another wave of Scandinavian immigration in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Queensland of the late-nineteenth century was possibly the most diversely populated of all the Australian colonies. Native-born jostled with immigrants from a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, and this included the largest population of Scandinavians to call Australia their new home. Whatever the issues faced by the Queensland government's assisted migration programs, their success in comparison to the other states is still quite an achievement. Between 1898 and 1901 the more than a thousand Scandinavians that came to Queensland as assisted immigrants, the majority of them young Danes with a rural dairying background, attest to the successes of what was in essence a troubled scheme.⁵¹ Due to this, Maximilian Brändle posits that colonial Queensland was a pace-setter in immigration and ideas of cultural pluralism. Between 1860 and 1919, only Queensland and Western Australia maintained a continuous policy of attracting migrants, [and was a] ... pioneer in seeking

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⁴⁵ Paulsen, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁴⁶ Michael Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration, 1915-1940: A Study of Desperate Hopes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-29

⁴⁹ Roe notes that in 1921, most policy makers assumed that these assistance schemes were only designed to provide aid to UK Britons, yet from April 1921 the Commonwealth-States scheme allowed nomination and faregrants also "to residents of France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Poland, Finland... the USA and other Dominions." Despite this, Prime Minister Hughes continued his focus on Britain as the prime source of Australia's new immigrants. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Koivukangas and Martin, op. cit., p. 178.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

substantial migrant groups of non-British origins, notably from Scandinavia and Germany".⁵² It is also important to note that only Queensland provided assisted passage schemes for non-British newcomers from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland.⁵³ This focus on encouraging immigration from a variety of sources greatly enhanced opportunities for those who wished to settle in the state and emphasised the diverse – if still heavily European and racially 'white' – origins of the Queensland populace.

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