

The Australias Are One John West guiding colonial Australia to nationhood*

Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff OAM

I acknowledge that we meet here today on the ancestral lands of the Ngunnawal people.

I thank the Australian Senate for this opportunity to stand before the original emblem of Federation, created in 1851, and to introduce to you its designer, John West, as one of the true founding fathers of the Australian nation.

The publisher's statement on the dust cover of my book, *The Usefulness of John West: Dissent & Difference in the Australian Colonies*, published a year ago, reads:

There is a chapter missing from the story of Australia. Historical writing has recognised the contributions of convicts, governors, settlers and explorers, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Scots Presbyterians, but the influence of the dissenting middle class has received less attention.¹

* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 23 July 2004. When published in *Papers on Parliament* No. 42 (December 2004), the illustration of the Anti-transportation League flag on p. 115 was inadvertently omitted. It is republished, with apologies to the author, with the flag in place.

¹ Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff, *The Usefulness of John West: Dissent and Difference in the Australian Colonies*, Launceston, Tas., Albernian Press 2003 [hereafter *Usefulness*]. Front jacket flap.

John West was arguably the most influential of the middle class dissenters, a person of colossal intellect, a dynamic orator with a mellifluous voice. He was independently educated, classically literate, an educator, lecturer and essayist, a political activist who published his *History of Tasmania*² in 1852 when it was still the convict colony of Van Diemen's Land, under the patronage of another Independent dissenter, Henry Hopkins. His *History* is included in a recent list of 101 best Australian books.³

With fellow-dissenters he co-founded the *Launceston Examiner* in 1842. He was its chief editorialist, and his inaugural editorial remains the exemplar of responsible journalistic practice.

He wrote and lectured on the widest possible range of subjects: bread and water problems in the daily life of his adopted community, against exclusivity in education, about the civilising effect of art in colonial life, the separation of Church and State, the consequences of the French Revolution of 1789 for the troubled British nation and her colonies, and the significance of the world of Mahometanism—his name for Islam—in relation to Christianity, a subject not without significance today.

John West was born in 1808 in Britain, into a world of agitation for political reform at home, while the Imperial government engaged in the colonisation of distant places through the transportation of its so-called 'criminal classes' abroad—a time also when to be socially useful was seen to be virtuous. The son of Christian parents, William and Ann West, he took their Wesleyan trend towards non-conformity a step further when he was ordained a minister of the Independent (later known as the Congregational) Church.

This denomination, together with the Baptists, Quakers, and secessionist Scots Presbyterians, consisted of Christians who held that there was no need for a priest to interpose between God and the believer, and that worship did not need to take place in a consecrated building. They dissented absolutely from the authority of the Church of England, with its hierarchy of deacons, priests and bishops, and a sovereign as head of a church established by law as the true religion of the State.

Dissenters paid dearly for their beliefs; they were denied civil rights and public office, and could not take degrees from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers who sailed across the seas in the seventeenth century and founded America were dissenting Christians. Roman Catholics were also in dissent, but for different reasons.

Independents were financially responsible for the construction of their own chapels, the supply of their own ministers, and creating their own schools with their own teachers. They also established services to the wider community, insurance companies, general cemeteries, breweries where the water supply was troublesome, immigration societies, mechanics' institutes and schools of arts which were sometimes the precursors of other cultural institutions: museums, public libraries and art galleries, as well as charitable activities such as strangers' friends societies and city missions.

² John West, *The History of Tasmania*, Launceston, Tas., Henry Dowling, 1852, 2 vols.

³ The *Bulletin* (Sydney), 19 November 1991: 100–104, selected by the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University.

Many of the great institutions we take for granted had their genesis in the private enterprise and voluntary activity of people who were in no doubt that they were their brother's keepers, and who were their brothers and sisters, and they regarded the receipt of financial aid from the State for religious purposes as a compromise of principle.

To further educate the wider community in their particular set of social and political values, they established their newspapers.

So, what was the significance of John West's particular value system to the civic position in which he found himself in the police state that was Van Diemen's Land in the first half of the nineteenth century?

John West migrated in 1838 with his wife Narcissa and five children under the age of seven. He came to Hobart Town, 'the Botany Bay of Botany Bay' as he described the place in his *History*.⁴ They travelled in the ship *Emu*, which also carried the news from the Colonial Office to the Governor that transportation was to cease, a decision that was not effected for another fifteen long years, until 1853, and in Western Australia not until 1868.

John West had many sources of political inspiration. His wide knowledge of history gave him access to the achievements of earlier British dissenters, from Cromwell and Milton, to the heritage of a famous body of memorialists for civil rights (a sort of parliament of lobbyists). They were known as the Dissenting Deputies.

An ecumenical committee of Christian laymen, it was founded in 1732 to lobby Parliament for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the repressive laws of Tudor origin that deprived dissenters of civil rights. One hundred years of faithful and persistent lobbying finally bore fruit in 1828, giving dissenters access to a limited democratic process.

John West's Independent Christian heritage was the fount of his democratic ideal. Independent or Congregational Churches were organised on democratic lines, being governed by their members who had an equal vote, whether minister or lay, man or woman. He wrote explicitly connecting Christianity to democracy in an editorial in the *Launceston Examiner* on 18 March 1854. This was the year he became official editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the newspaper of his fellow dissenter and friend from their Warwickshire days, John Fairfax. Entitled 'Democracy', the editorial reads:

Some ignorant, half-witted, and beclouded bigots are yet in the habit of quoting this term as synonymous with anarchy, though it only accurately describes that influence the people are entitled to exercise in the management of public affairs. In England and in every other constituted state, it is democracy that in the long run moulds and fashions every movement, but few seem to be aware of its origin.

⁴ West, op. cit., vol. 1: 29.

In [James Aitken] Wylie's prize essay, democracy is placed in its true position. He says:

It was through Christianity that the first democratic element came into the world. That principle was altogether unknown to the ancient governments which were either autocracies or in a few instances oligarchies. The people as such were excluded from all share and influence in government. Christianity was the first to teach the essential quality of all men, and the first to erect a system of government in which the people are admitted to those rights⁵

He goes on to recognise that the Church 'abandoning her own idea, began to copy in her government and organisation, the order of the State', otherwise, 'ere this time of day, the world would have been filled with free and constitutional states.'⁶

It was John West's desire that a future union or federation of *the Australias*, the name he used for the antipodean colonies, would be conducted on democratic Christian principles, the principles he employed in his daily life. A miniature democratic community was set up in Launceston where nine women and nine men signed the Covenant which established their little Independent Church in St. John's Square. The equality of gender implied in the wording of the Covenant signifies the esteem in which each held the other. A small community of brewers, schoolteachers, newspaper proprietors, editors, carpenters, builders, and merchants, they became the fount of the local Christian social enterprise.

The greatest social issue confronting the colonial societies of pre-federation Australia was the problem of the moral, political, and economic consequences for all the antipodean colonies of the policies of the British government which had declared it expedient that Van Diemen's Land alone should be the *Empire's gaol*.

During the years of his governorship of Van Diemen's Land (1824–1836) the military Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur created a dependency in the free settlers on the assignment of a captive labour force to develop their sometimes vast estates. With the support of the Commissariat, they constructed their excellent houses, grew their crops and minded their sheep, while a police state with closed borders ensured a seemingly ordered society.

But all this changed with the conclusions of the 1837 Molesworth Select Committee of the House of Commons who found that transportation as a method of minimising crime in the British community had failed and therefore should be abandoned. The government did not abolish transportation but decided that the system whereby a prisoner by assignment became effectively the property of the settler, with most of the moral implications of slavery, would cease.

There remained in Britain the need to deal with the numbers of convicted classes consequent upon the abolition of the death penalty for a wide range of crimes short of

⁵ James Aitken Wylie, 'The Papacy: its History, Dogmas, Genius, and Prospects', Evangelical Alliance Prize Essay, 1851. Wylie (1808–1890) was a Scottish protestant journalist, writer and historian.

⁶ *Launceston Examiner*, 18 March 1854.

treason and murder. Transportation of these persons would continue to Van Diemen's Land, but under a new system devised by Lord Stanley, the transportees, to be called 'exiles', were subject to a system of probation which allowed them to climb ladders or slide down snakes according to their capacity for reform.

The free settlers of Van Diemen's Land were outraged at the decision to end assignment of labour. Public meetings of pro-transportationists in 1839 authorised and paid for an unsuccessful petition to Queen Victoria for the continuation of transportation and assignment. Transportation did continue, under the new system of probation whereby 'exiles', no longer assigned, were housed in government barracks and employed on public works. Only when they had concluded their probation period successfully would they be available as a colonial labour force, now free to work for wages, and thus to compete with the free labour force.

On mainland Australia, a new nation was forming—what was its real democratic potential?

John West did not stand idly by while Van Diemen's Land, a society divided between convicts and privileged settler classes sank into the civil and moral inequality inherent in its role as the Empire's gaol. Launceston, the town of his adoption, maintained and serviced and exploited the obvious appurtenances of convictism, the treadmill, the public gallows in Paterson Street, the stocks in Cameron Street, the Female Factory.

Limited freedom to pursue self-government had been granted to the other colonies, New South Wales to which transportation had ceased, South Australia, where transportation had been explicitly excluded from the beginning, and Western Australia, where convictism was rejected until after it was abandoned in the Eastern colonies. Victoria on separation inherited the freedom of New South Wales. New Zealand had never directly known the 'convict stain'.

The attractions of an easily exploited captive labour force remained, putting in jeopardy the prospects of free emigrant labour. In this setting, John West took up the task of injecting hope and expectation of a more just society into his hearers and readers. John West shared Anthony Trollope's faith in the power of the pen. 'We all know', claimed Trollope, 'That if anything is ever done in any way towards improvement, the public press does it.'⁷

He began his campaign for the Australias' emancipation from convictism in verse:

There is a midnight blackness changing into grey,
Men of thought and men of action clear the way!
Once the welcome light has broken
Who shall say
What the unimagined glories of the day.
Aid the dawning, tongues and pen,
Aid it, hopes of honest men,
Aid it paper—aid it type,
Aid it, for the hour is ripe

⁷ Anthony Trollope, 1858.

And our earnest must not slacken into play:
Men of thought and action clear the way!⁸

John West had no illusions about the vast and powerful imperial forces gathered in the Colonial Office in Downing Street, Westminster, and he understood clearly that educated men of thought and action were needed to liberate the colonists from the thrall of convictism.

Writing with well-cloaked irony, he alerted colonists to the pitfalls of government from the Colonial Office. In his fourth essay on Union, he said:

Downing Street is the celebrated seat of a colonial empire upon which, as has been said, the sun never sets. And Downing Street is the substitute for federation.

The modesty of its designation, the simplicity of its aspect and the gentleness of its dialect, create no suspicion of tyranny ... the homely, familiar, unpretending name which yet includes the sovereignty of nascent empires has nothing august, thrilling, or soul subduing; suggests nothing but friendly calls and punctual correspondence. Still, we know that it is in Downing Street 'the groans of Australia die away in silence'; there it is that despatches, which have run over half the world are couched in oblivion; while beneath in cellars of unfathomable depth, long-forgotten petitions that have prayed in vain, and memorials as dead as a man out of mind, lie deep in dust.⁹

The Colonial Office had come under the charge of Henry George Grey—Viscount Howick until he succeeded to the Earldom in 1845. George Grey, in the words of John M. Ward was 'a high-minded minister who sought to act wisely and rightly towards the Empire as a whole' and who 'made the most extensive and determined efforts to improve its system of government.' As an ardent free-trader, Earl Grey 'thought that the Australian colonies might be federated so that tariff barriers would not hinder their development' and proposed to provide them 'with some central authority to handle matters that concerned them in common.'¹⁰

But the inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land, bond and free, held little in common with the partly enfranchised citizens of the sister colonies. Her status as a penal colony would, if persisting, condemn all her inhabitants as social pariahs and preclude any possibility of their contributing to nationhood.

The Rev. John West, ever the ardent supporter of political and religious freedom, persistently promoted the idea of people's democratic representation. As early as 1842, he wrote in the *Examiner* on the desirability of 'the only effective resource—a united

⁸ *Launceston Examiner*, 16 June 1848: 46, concluding editorial on the French Revolution of 1848 (quoted in *Usefulness*: 364). Verse possibly by Narcissa West.

⁹ Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff (ed.), *John West's Union of the Colonies; Essays on Federation Published under the Pseudonym of John Adams*, Launceston, Tas., Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 2000 [hereafter *Union*], pp. 43–46; quoted in *Usefulness* at 160.

¹⁰ John M. Ward, *Earl Grey and the Australian Colonies 1846–1857: a Study of Self-Government and Self-Interest*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1959: v; *Usefulness*, p. 373.

effort to secure that form of legislation in which alone the voice of the people is heard, their interests understood—their wishes regarded.’¹¹

However, by 1848, John West was obliged to argue against Earl Grey’s federation for the Australias on the very clear grounds of the prevailing state of social and civic inequality of their citizens.

He looked to history for examples of other colonies dealing with the intransigence of British policy, and saw the Americas and their battle for representation. They had faced similar intransigence, their argument weakened by the distance of its voice. America created its own significant voice in London when Edmund Burke was appointed as their Agent on a salary of £500 per annum to plead their cause at the seat of Government. Van Diemen’s Land would follow in their footsteps.

John West put together millions of words on colonial emancipation from convictism. Editorials in the *Launceston Examiner* and the Hobart Town *Colonial Times*, his pamphlet (following Thomas Paine) entitled ‘*Common Sense: An Inquiry into the Influence of Transportation on the Colony of V. D. Land*’, (which was distributed as far afield as South Africa, and doubtless also to Great Britain), petitions, instructions to the London Agent, half a volume of his *History* (exposing in detail the process and effect of transportation), memorials and pleas, all were written to enable colonists to treat intelligently with Downing Street.

However, Britain was preoccupied with ‘questions more important than a single colony’¹²—the potential war in the Crimea, the consequences of the famine in Ireland, rebellion in Canada, and paid little heed to the agitations from obscure agriculturalists, merchants and men of God who Lord Stanley regarded as deserving of their fate. In his opinion, the settlers knew they were migrating to a penal colony, and must accept the consequences.¹³

Hobart Town on the south side of the island was the seat of colonial government, while the northern side was the engine of private enterprise. Influential men of thought and action assembled there often at significant public meetings, and their proceedings and findings were faithfully reported in the *Launceston Examiner*. Colonists found their voice at the seat of Imperial government when they created their own London Agency Association.

John Alexander Jackson, former editor of the *Launceston Independent* newspaper, former Colonial Secretary and Treasurer of South Australia, was appointed their agent at £400 per annum for two years, the entire cost coming out of their own pockets. James Cox of Clarendon subscribed £25, while John West himself subscribed a modest one guinea, in addition to the liberality of the proprietary of the *Examiner*. South Australian residents added £130 annually, believing that ‘Mr. Jackson’s advocacy of their claims need not clash with the interests of their own country but be greatly benefited by his zealous energy.’

¹¹ *Launceston Examiner*, 1842: 46; *Usefulness*, p. 365.

¹² *Usefulness*, p. 375.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Jackson, under the guidance of a local committee, looked to John West whose most significant contribution he acknowledged to be the Letter of Instructions.¹⁴

The London Agent was the colony's instrument for change. The Canadian, C.D. Allin, in his history *The Early Federation Movement of Australia*, commented:

The novel suggestion for the appointment of colonial agents in London who could co-operate in the advancement of Australian interests subsequently bore fruit in the creation of a corps of agents-general who have proved a most effective instrument for influencing the policy of Downing Street.¹⁵

Barbara Atkins tells us:

The work of the Agents-General is, in a sense, an expression of nineteenth century Australian nationalism—they were the first ambassadors of an incipient Australian nation to a foreign country.¹⁶

Agents-General to the Crown Colonies already existed in London; Imperial public servants, their salaries were paid out of colonial funds, but they were criticised for lack of action. There was also the New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land Commercial Association to which John West recommended the London Agent, Jackson.

Economic prosperity and social emancipation accelerated on mainland Australia while tolerance of the distressing social conditions of an isolated Van Diemen's Land reached a dangerous and despairing ebb. Despite a despatch from Earl Grey in February 1847 that transportation was finally terminated, shiploads of convicts continued to arrive on her shores, creating 'an intolerable grievance'¹⁷ for the community. Forty per cent of the population were now a bonded class of human beings, many housed in overcrowded and insanitary barrack accommodation.

Furthermore, New South Wales landowners and squatters, with the collusion of the Secretary of State in London,¹⁸ hired some of Britain's so-called 'exiles', creating a broader demand for a labour force whose condition of inequality was seriously exploitable. The emerging nation of Australia was in great danger of having the existing class distinctions firmly entrenched by government policy.

Two years of representation and lobbying for emancipation from convictism by the London Agent achieved absolutely nothing, and it was now believed that Britain intended to revive transportation to New South Wales.¹⁹

¹⁴ *Usefulness*, p. 381.

¹⁵ C.D. Allin, *The Early Federation Movement in Australia*, Kingston, Ontario, British Whig Publishing Co. 1907, p. 70.

¹⁶ Barbara R. Atkins, 'The Problem of Representation of Australia in England. The Origins and Development of the Australian Agents-General during the Nineteenth Century', M.A. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960.

¹⁷ *Union*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Union*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Usefulness*, p. 385.

The latest Governor of Van Diemen's Land was William Denison, the man who became Australia's first Governor-General. His salary of £2000 per annum was supplemented by another £2000 per annum to make the unhappy system of probation work.

The 1850s were the turning point in the civilising of Australia. The British Empire's pre-eminence was to be celebrated by a great exhibition in which the Empire's products and artefacts would invite favourable comparison with those of all other nations.

Governor Denison and the local Royal Society organised the transportation of examples of convict workmanship and the riches of Van Diemen's Land to London, to be exhibited in the great Crystal Palace in Hyde Park erected for the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, which became known as the Great Exhibition of 1851. No indigenous artefacts were sent.²⁰

Seemingly, Britain was quite intransigent on the question of transportation. Lines were drawn in the sand as the protagonists for emancipation rallied their forces against those who desired continuation of the entrenchment by government policy of an inferior class of citizens. In 1850 a call of last resource was made to the Australasian colonies for colonial emancipation.

A letter was drawn up by John West, Frederick du Croz and Adye Douglas and signed by the Rev. Dr William Browne of the Launceston Association for the Cessation of the Transportation of Convicts. It put the case for a unity of colonial interests. It was sent to the chief magistrates, colonial secretaries and legislative councils of the Australian colonies and New Zealand, for while South Australia and New Zealand had been designated as destinations to which prisoners could not be transported, the continuing influx of emancipated convicts to those colonies evoked harsh discriminatory legislation against such arrivals.

The letter begins:

As a last resource we turn to our fellow colonists who united to us by the strictest ties are liable to the same wrongs ... Her Majesty's ministers have taught the communities established in this portion of the Empire that their ultimate interests are One, that upon the public spirit, intelligence and virtue of each depend the happiness and prosperity of all.

The letter outlines in stark detail the facts and figures of transportation and its moral and social consequences. It concludes:

We submit to your humanity as a British fellow subject and to your discretion as a Christian magistrate, the case for this country. In the mutation of human affairs, the arm of oppression which has smitten us with desolation, may strike at your social well-being. Communities allied by blood, language and

²⁰ Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, 1851, Catalogue, Van Diemen's Land.

commerce cannot long suffer alone. We conjure you, therefore, by the unity of colonial interests—as well by the obligations which bind all men to intercede with the strong and unjust on behalf of the feeble and oppressed—to exert your influence to the intent that transportation to V. D. Land may forever cease.²¹

There was sufficient response to encourage the Launceston association to expand its aims into a national movement. New South Wales set up its own Association for the Prevention of the Revival of Transportation, and Victoria and the Geelong district each set up their own anti-transportation societies.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* believed that: ‘The best way of dealing with this revival was that suggested by V.D. Land, the formulation of a great Australian confederation.’²²

A common interest having been avowed by the continental colonies to liberate Van Diemen’s Land, a decision was taken to form the first Australian intercolonial political association: the Australasian Anti-Transportation League. It embraced the colonies of South Australia, Van Diemen’s Land, Victoria, New South Wales and New Zealand, and proposed to hold its inaugural conference in Melbourne, for geographical reasons.

However, New South Wales believed the suppression of transportation would be best achieved by the existing processes of correspondence and petitioning, and did not attend. Nor did South Australia, where it was believed that public opinion was not yet ripe.²³

With no representation from either colony, the delegates from Victoria and Van Diemen’s Land assembled in the Queen’s Theatre, Melbourne, and on 1 February 1851, formed the League.²⁴

The League, whose ends were to be achieved by moral means only, demanded a solemn Engagement that was drastic and absolute. Members would pledge not to employ any person hereafter arriving under sentence of transportation for crime committed in Europe.²⁵

When John West denominated the Colonies as the Australias, he created for colonists a new identity, awakening a national sentiment.

He further expanded that sentiment with a symbol of nationhood, the Australasian Anti-Transportation League banner. He believed it was ‘the beautiful emblem of indissoluble union and that it would be the glory of Australasia that she would achieve victory by a moral force as fine as the spotless border which surrounds the standard to be hailed as the emblem of Federation.’²⁶

²¹ Reprinted in full in *Usefulness*, Appendix Two, pp. 547–548.

²² *Sydney Morning Herald*, quoted in West, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 301.

²³ *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 January 1851; *Argus* (Melb.), 13 January 1851; quoted in *Union*, p. 13.

²⁴ West, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 307.

²⁵ The Australasian League, reprinted in facsimile, *Usefulness*, Appendix Three, p. 549.

²⁶ *Launceston Examiner*, 15 March 1851, quoted in *Usefulness*, pp. 409–410.

The original banner, hand sewn in silk by the women of Launceston, was unfurled at the inauguration of the League at the Queen's Theatre in Melbourne on 1 February, 1851. It had the Union Flag in the canton, and a broad deep blue field with four stars displaying the Southern Cross. On the upper border in gold were the words 'Australasian Anti-Transportation League'; in the lower margin, 'Established 1851'.²⁷

A second version of the banner (see illustration) was sewn by the women of Melbourne in twelve days, also in silks. Twelve feet by nine feet (360 cm x 270 cm), it has an added star for New Zealand, and in gold on the white border are the words, 'Australasian League—Tasmania—Instituted 1851'.



Banner of the Australasian League, 1851
Collection of Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

This banner was presented to the Van Diemen's Land delegates at a great gathering at St Patrick's Hall in Melbourne on 13 February 1851, and carried in triumphant procession when John West and his party returned to Launceston. It was copied, manufactured in bunting, displayed at rallies, flown from mastheads, and observed on ships as far afield as the United States.

Subsequently John West and William Weston were delegated to visit the recalcitrant colonies and evangelise them in the cause. From March to May, 1851, New South Wales was being persuaded. The campaign culminated in success on May 10th. Under the conspicuous Victorian banner of the League, a grand conference dinner for 200 persons was held at Mort and Brown's huge Sydney warehouse. Charles Cowper

²⁷ West, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 313.

presided, the New South Wales Association was dissolved, and the Australasian League adopted.²⁸

John West successfully evangelised South Australia in September, and in October, Canterbury in New Zealand adopted the League's solemn engagement.

However, also in 1851, gold was discovered on Mainland Australia, and in the words of John West:

Gold fields beyond the dreams of oriental vision unfolded while relations between labour and capital were entirely deranged—some considering their personal interests growing more earnest for convict labour. More generous spirits sympathised with the general aspect of a change promising to people a region as large as Europe. The strenuous resistance of transportation had cleared the character of the colonists and proved their feelings had harmonised with the universal and unchangeable convictions of mankind.²⁹

By December, 1851, all the supplicating voices united with Van Diemen's Land against transportation. Five colonies answered to the stars of the Christian symbol of the Southern Cross.

One year later, in December 1852, transportation to the Eastern colonies was abolished.

The Anti-Transportation League had achieved its aims and was dissolved in 1854. Writing in the *Examiner* on 25 April, John West was able to comment:

A lesson has been taught which will never be forgotten, it is that the Colonies isolated are powerless, united, invincible. It is on this account we are in favour of a strong federal government to regulate those affairs which are common to all, the tariff, land regulations, postal communications and defence from the attack of a foreign foe. This conceded, there would be no necessity for an organisation like the League, as a central authority on the spot would decide every general question. There is nothing to fear in the future progress of Australia; every temporary and trumpery obstacle fashioned by official fingers to stay her progress will be swept away as cobwebs by a breath of popular will.³⁰

Eighteen fifty-four is the significant year for Australia, Van Diemen's Land, and John West. It was the year of the Eureka Stockade, and, the year an Act of the Imperial Parliament established a colonial parliament in Van Diemen's Land, which was renamed Tasmania.³¹ And it was the year John Fairfax travelled to Tasmania and successfully persuaded John West to accept his invitation to be the first official editor

²⁸ *Union*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Union*, p. 18.

³⁰ *Launceston Examiner*, 25 April 1854, quoted in *Union*, p. 20.

³¹ 18 Vic. No. 7.

of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, thus guaranteeing the continuing influence of dissenting middle class Christians in the affairs of state.

John West had already published ‘Outlines of a new constitution: adapted to the circumstances of Tasmania or any of the other Australian colonies’ in the *Launceston Examiner* in August 1853.³² It was the work of another famous dissident, the ‘revolutionary imperialist’ Irish exile, William Smith O’Brien, who had previously written an impressive review of John West’s *History of Tasmania*.

John West followed this with his seventeen essays on federation entitled ‘Union of the Colonies’, which he published under the pseudonym of John Adams—after the second President of the United States. Some appeared in the *Launceston Examiner*, and all in the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 30 January to 18 September, 1854.³³

John West’s campaign for educated and responsible political representation being under way, in October, he accepted John Fairfax’s invitation to join him in New South Wales. He occupied that challenging position as the voice of the most influential newspaper in Australia at the time, with style and much erudition for nineteen years, until his death in office.

He republished six of his ‘Union’ essays in 1867 in a vain attempt to resolve the issue of narrow colonial protectionism, then as now complicating Australian affairs despite Section 92, a matter which had arisen by the introduction of a ‘Tasmanian Act to Promote Intercolonial Free Trade’. He commented:

At present we treat each other as foreigners—we are protected against each other—we are jealous of manufacturing or agricultural prosperity on the other side of any of the geographical lines which separate us from each other—and this kind of policy is commended as natural, as calculated to Advance Australia.³⁴

For nearly thirty years in the fledgling nation that was Australia in the nineteenth century, John West’s concern was for the competence of legislators. Conscious of the historical differences which marked each colony, and mindful of the immense moral power of the press, he sought to educate and enlighten colonists on the vicissitudes facing Australia on the path to democracy. In his essays he discusses the problems of other nations, Britain, the United States of America, the United Colonies of Canada, the Dutch Republic after 1648, the Swiss federation, Earl Grey’s ‘paper constitution’ and other experiments for New Zealand.

In his first essay on federation, he stated:

³² *Launceston Examiner*, 31 August 1853, reprinted as Appendix One in Richard Davies (ed.), *To Solitude Consigned: the Tasmanian Journal of William Smith O’Brien 1849–1853*, Sydney, Crossing Press, 1995. Richard Davies’ biography of O’Brien is entitled *Revolutionary Imperialist: William Smith O’Brien 1803–1864*, Dublin/Sydney, Lilliput Press/Crossing Press, 1998.

³³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1867.

³⁴ *Union*, passim.

No system of government can or ought to be satisfactory which does anything for the people which they can better do for themselves or takes out of the hands of a town, a district or a Colony, affairs which are limited in their interest which vary according to every place, or such as may be properly left to the judgement or even the caprice of those concerned.³⁵

A different level of decision-making was needed at each level of government: ‘A young colony cannot furnish a considerable assembly without descending low in the scale of political intelligence’ was his view.³⁶ Consequently, he recommended a hierarchy of elected authorities—voluntary organisations, local government, state government, federal government. Ultimately, his vision was for a world federation: ‘It is conceivable that vast masses of mankind may conspire to set up one grand authority as the only security.’³⁷ A remarkable vision for a colonial journalist as nation states approached their apogee, and European powers grasped for empire.

John West believed that to suppress lower order democratic institutions was to prevent training and acculturation in democratic principles and practice. His arguable constitutional beliefs were for an educated one-person-one-vote democracy, and universal suffrage based on the practices of his own daily life—in Congregational churches, women had equal voting power.

He favoured a bi-cameral parliament with a lower house popularly elected and an upper house by the same electors, but with equal representation for each colony, recognising their different interests and sizes. In the manner of electing his proposed upper house, he was far in advance of the United States at the time.³⁸

He promoted federation rather than amalgamation, under the existing connections with the Crown.

He was ambivalent about the site of a national capital, believing a separate territory would prevent the dominance of one state (New South Wales), but he was against it as being remote from the centre of population and thus separated in those days from the vital influence of the Press: ‘It is certain that the geographical distance diminishes the effect of political demonstrations and creates a disposition to neglect and despise them.’³⁹

He thought Governors-General ought not to have been state governors—the first Governor-General (his old adversary Denison) had been Governor of Van Diemen’s Land and then New South Wales, creating a potential conflict of interest.

³⁵ *Union*, Essay I, p. 29.

³⁶ *Union*, Essay X, pp. 67–68.

³⁷ *Union*, Essay VI, p. 51.

³⁸ US Senators were appointed by their state legislatures according to Article 1, Section 3 of the US Constitution until the XVIIth Amendment in 1913.

³⁹ *Union*, Essay IX, p. 63.

He favoured a conservative principle: ‘if by that is understood whatever binds a nation together, whatever speaks with moderation and reasons with dignity, rallies round the principle of federation.’

John West led a movement which won emancipation for Van Diemen’s Land, civic equality for all Australians and the nation’s freedom from the Imperial government’s policy that would have entrenched class distinction.

John West did not live to progress his deeply personal and well-informed dream of a liberal, prosperous and moral nation. He did not witness the culmination of his efforts in a federal ideal. He died in 1873.

The exclusion of the Reverend John West from the national roll of honour of those who fathered Federation remains a hole in the fabric of the Australian story and I, following the Launceston and Melbourne seamstresses whose needles created the first Australasian League banners, have endeavoured to mend it.



Question — You mentioned that John West was editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* for nineteen years, and you have given us some of his views, which appear to be quite advanced for the time, especially in relation to democracy. Yet the *Sydney Morning Herald* had a reputation in the nineteenth century for conservatism and for being the journal of the conservative ruling element of the population. Could you explain that?

Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff — I am not really familiar with the politics of New South Wales after 1854. I am conscious that the newspaper had the reputation for conservatism, and I understand it was a very different arena in politics. West confronted Henry Parkes of course, who was also from Warwickshire. Henry Parkes was not active in the Australasian League in its early days, at all. Henry Parkes and Lang and others had established the *Australian League*, which faded and disappeared before 1851, when Lang went to jail. The battle over federation and the transportation of convicts was not seen as so significant from New South Wales as it was by John West from Tasmania. That does not really answer your question, as I am not familiar with post-1854 New South Wales politics, only with John West’s contribution before he went up to Sydney.

Question — You were speaking about the Governors-General of the time. My understanding is that the first one was actually Fitzroy, who was Denison’s predecessor in New South Wales. I am referring to the 1847 ideas of Earl Grey on federation, which they attempted to establish by the appointment of a Governor-General, but only two, Fitzroy and Dennison were appointed, and then the office was abandoned because of opposition among the colonies. On another matter, the attempt by the British authorities in the Colonial Office to introduce some form of political association of the colonies is something that seems to be scarcely mentioned these days. Of course it was a failure, because the newly created authorities in each of the separate colonies would have no part of it.

Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff — We must take that in two parts, because in 1847 when federation was initially mooted, Van Diemen's Land was still a penal colony and a police state and there were no civic rights whatsoever. The argument by John West from Van Diemen's Land about rights has been lost in the arguments from the other colonies, who had their own particular interests. Regarding Governor Dennison, he accepted a commission in 1852 on the same day to be both Governor-General and the Governor of New South Wales. It was my understanding he was the original, perhaps followed by Fitzroy.

Question — I noticed that in his list of 'Affairs Common to All', West did not identify Aboriginal issues. You said that he favoured universal suffrage and civil equality, so I wondered whether he included Aboriginal people in that. In his extensive writings, did he have anything to say about the treatment of Aboriginal people? If not, do you have any comment on why he didn't?

Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff — When John West was writing and during his time in Van Diemen's Land there were only a mere handful of Aboriginal people. They were referred to as the 'remnants of the race', and had been exiled offshore to Wybalenna on Flinders Island. They were not regarded as being capable of surviving as a race, and the Tasmanian Aboriginal community was seen at that time as a distinctive race of Aborigines. In my reading of history and newspapers of the time, there is scant reference whatsoever to Aborigines. So they were really not in the equation. I have seen a report from the London *Times* of 1863 which said that it was expected that the Aboriginal people of Australia would be extinct by 1900. That was the thought of the day.

John West wrote about the condition of Aborigines up until 1850, when he published his *History of Tasmania*, and it is harrowing reading because he spares nothing in relaying the facts. He saw them as being, by their nature, overwhelmed. He writes about the injustice, and about the fact that there were no treaties with them—he was very critical. But it is a sad reflection on our comprehension of the significance of Aboriginal communities, that John West had very little to say about them in his general writing. They were not mentioned in his writing to any great extent at all.

I once checked out the year books of the Tasmanian Government to see when the word 'Aborigine' or 'Aboriginal' disappeared out of the index. It disappeared in 1874, even though Truganini didn't die until 1876. By the time she died, she was not even called 'Aborigine', she was called 'Lalla Rookh'.⁴⁰ The word 'Aborigine' just disappears entirely out of Tasmanian government records until the 1960s, when it was brought back again.

⁴⁰ Lalla Rookh was the eponymous heroine of Thomas Moore's long poem, published in 1817.