

The Inaugural John Saunders Lecture

The professional and personal witness of the Reverend John Saunders in Sydney, 1834-1847

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1 May 2008

Introduction

The Reverend John Saunders is arguably the most outstanding colonial Australian Baptist minister. He stands in the shadow of other Protestant pioneers such as Samuel Edward Marsden (1765-1838) and John Dunmore Lang (1799-1878), but has no equal among nineteenth-century Baptists in New South Wales. Saunders was an outstanding preacher, a wise pastor, a strategic church planter, a supporter of world mission, and an exemplar of Christian social responsibility.

Saunders' strengths and interests are not well known by NSW Baptists today.² From time to time there were attempts to celebrate his achievements and keep alive his legacy. On 15 September 1963, for example, the Youth and Christian Education Council of the Baptist Union of NSW opened a camp building at Macquarie Fields south-west of Sydney (then undeveloped rural land) and called it Camp Saunders after the pioneer leader. This, along with Camp Carey at Wentworth Falls, in the Blue Mountains, became the denomination's major campsites in the 1960s as youth ministry burgeoned.³ But the official program of the Centenary Assembly of the Baptist Union of NSW in 1968, which includes a brief history of the beginnings of Baptist work in NSW, does not mention him.⁴

More recently, in 2001, the Baptist Union of Australia, through the facilitation of the Canberra Baptist Church, celebrated Saunders' notable contribution to Aboriginal justice with the publication

¹ In 2006 the author encouraged the Social Issues Committee of the Baptist Union of NSW to consider an appropriate form of recognition of John Saunders' contribution to the early development of the Baptist denomination in NSW and to the wider community through his interest in social concern and social action. As a result, in February 2007 the Social Issues Committee resolved to commission an annual lecture addressing social and ethical issues from an evangelical Christian perspective. The Inaugural John Saunders Lecture, an activity of the Social Issues Committee, took place on 1 May 2008 with the hope that it would become an annual event. The lecture was revised for publication on 29 October 2009.

² On Saunders see Ken R. Manley & Michael Petras, *The First Australian Baptists* (Eastwood, NSW: Baptist Historical Society of NSW, 1981), pp. 53-64; Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 324; and Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists. Volume 1: Growing an Australian Church (1831-1914); and Volume 2: A National Church in a Global Community (1914-2005)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), pp. 23-39, 41-43, 344f, 769f.

³ *The Australian Baptist*, 3 Aug 1960; "Official Opening 'Camp Saunders Chapel,' Sunday 15th September 1963," in *Minute Book of BUNSW Annual Assembly and Executive Committee (11 Sep 1958-17 Sep 1963)*, p. 501; Baptist Union of NSW *Handbook* 1997-98 (Glebe: BUNSW, 1997), p. 34. When opened, Camp Saunders replaced a previous "Rostherne" campsite used by Baptists at Port Hacking. The two sites were sold in 1990 and the funds were used to purchase the Kiah Ridge camping site at Tahmoor.

⁴ "Official Program of the Centenary Assembly of the Baptist Union of N.S.W., September 19-26, 1968," attached to p. 501 in *Minute Book of BUNSW Annual Assembly and Executive Committee (15 Sep 1964-26 Sep 1968)*, pp. 14-16.

of a booklet coinciding with a peak in interest in the troubled Aboriginal reconciliation movement.⁵ Other examples of his social action are less well known. Also in 2001, coincidentally, his name was given to the single men's dormitory at Morling College, the Baptist Theological College of NSW.⁶ No other building, monument or award in Australia honours the first official Baptist minister in NSW. Ken Manley featured Saunders in the early pages of his magisterial history of Australian Baptists published in 2006, but the 200th anniversary of Saunders' birth the same year passed unnoticed. The year 2009 marks the 175th anniversary of Saunders' arrival, with his wife Elizabeth, at Sydney Cove.

PART 1. "Renounce sin and embrace Christ": The life and ministry of John Saunders

John Saunders was born on 7 October 1806 in London into an influential middle class Church of England family. His father, Ebenezer Saunders, was a city alderman, as was his father before him. The motto on their family crest was "*Sans Dieu Rien*" ("Nothing without God").

The young John Saunders was articled to a London attorney and became a solicitor. At the age of 17 he was baptized by immersion and admitted to the membership of the Baptist Church in Cold Harbour Lane, Camberwell, under the ministry of the Rev. E. Steane. At the age of 19, Saunders began preparation for missionary service, making contact with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in the hope of being sent to India. The BMS, for its part, required Saunders to agree to attend a Baptist academy for a year and then serve in either the East or West Indies. He declined these terms, but was privately tutored and later studied for a term at the University of Edinburgh, before being ordained to the Baptist ministry in England.⁷ He planted Baptist churches at Mason Court, Shoreditch and Ball's Pond, and was minister of two London churches in Shacklewell and Stoke Newington. In 1834, at the age of 28, while minister at Stoke Newington, he declined an opportunity to enter Parliament.⁸

Passage to Sydney

On the other side of the world, in a bustling colonial convict settlement called Sydney Town, the eccentric Revd John McKaeg (c.1790-c.1835? or 1844?) was fighting a losing battle to maintain his brief and unofficial Baptist ministry, his sobriety and his freedom from debtor's prison. Some members of the fledgling congregation, consisting mainly of Particular Baptists and independent Protestants, felt compelled to write to the BMS seeking a more suitable pastor. On behalf of the Society, the Revd John Dyer approached Saunders, who possessed the means to pay for his own cabin and agreed to embark on a "visit" to Sydney.

Constitutionally the BMS was committed to evangelism "through the heathen world," which did not necessarily include Australia, and it was under no obligation to pay his passage or stipend. Nevertheless, the BMS formally farewelled Saunders at its annual meeting in June 1834, he was "set apart for foreign service" at the Shacklewell Church on 2 July, and on 27 July Saunders and

⁵ Jill Sutton (ed.), *Rev John Saunders: a beacon light and some Baptist reflections* (Canberra: Baptist Union of Australia, 2001).

⁶ *Summa Supremo* (Morling College quarterly newsletter), Oct 2001.

⁷ J.D. Bollen, "English-Australian Baptist relations 1830-1860," *The Baptist Quarterly* 25 (7), July 1974, pp. 292-293.

⁸ B.G. Wright, "Saunders, John (1806-1859)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (vol. 2; Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967), p. 418, available at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A020373b.htm>.

his wife of four months, Elizabeth (“Bessy”) Willox,⁹ whom he affectionately called “wifey,” sailed for Sydney aboard the *George Hibberd*, a 328-ton barque transporting 144 female convicts (“consigned servants”) and 38 free passengers emigrating to Australia.¹⁰ Saunders was appointed Church of England chaplain to the women convicts for the duration of the voyage. He was 28 when he and Elizabeth first set foot on Australian soil at Sydney Cove on 1 December the same year. In contrast to McKaeg, Saunders was said to have exercised an “educated, tolerant and rational ministry.”¹¹

At first sight, Sydney Town made a striking impression on Saunders. It was, he wrote,

like some oriental city rising from the wilderness at the command of a despotic power. On landing its streets appear wretched, sandy and loose, a hovel next to a respectable shop, a hut next to a mansion a Prince might be proud of.

Two weeks later he described the people he had encountered on Sydney streets as “so thin, so sunburnt and many of them so drunk – not a lady to be seen, hardly a woman. It appeared as if we had landed among a set of the most degraded and uncomfortable beings.” Yet it was to these people he believed he had been called, and in obedience to that divine call he quickly set about planning and organising his new antipodean ministry, recruiting and serving the diverse people of Sydney Town. On arrival, Saunders and his wife lived with Robert Bourne (1794-1871), who had been a London Missionary Society missionary in the South Sea Islands but who had moved to Sydney on account of his wife’s ill health. Bourne was a prosperous linen draper, and became a foundation member of the church Saunders was to plant at Bathurst Street.¹²

Building a Baptist Church in Sydney

Baptist services of worship commenced immediately, first at an unidentified location in York Street and then in the schoolroom attached to St James’ Church of England, known as the Court House Room (on the corner of King and Phillip Streets). These services typically involved the singing of hymns, reading of short passages of Scripture, public prayer and a sermon. Saunders’ stipend, originally set at £120 per year and increased in 1843 to £300, then decreased to £200 amid general privation in 1844, was drawn largely from pew rentals and small personal donations, supplemented from time to time by gifts from his loyal father in England.¹³

John McKaeg was still active with a small group of supporters, and had received a state land grant to erect a place of worship. Saunders appears to have enjoyed a cordial relationship with McKaeg, and successfully negotiated for the transfer of trusteeship of the land to members of his own congregation. On this land, granted in July 1835, he proceeded to build a substantial church.¹⁴ The Bathurst Street Baptist Church, designed by architect and builder John Verge (1782-1861), duly opened on 23 September 1836, and seated up to 400 people. The property continued to serve the church until resumed by the NSW Government for redevelopment just over a century later.

⁹ Elizabeth was the daughter of Lieutenant William Willox of the Royal Artillery, Woolwich and Fort St George, and was, according to her granddaughter E.M.W. Renwick, “always more or less of an invalid.” She died at Clarendon House, Sydney, in 1878. See E.M.W. Renwick, “Rev John Saunders,” *The Australian Baptist*, 12 Jan 1937, p. 5.

¹⁰ *The Sydney Herald*, 4 December 1834, p. 2. The Revd Mr Saunders’ tops the free passenger list.

¹¹ Ken R. Manley & Michael J. Petras, *The First Australian Baptists* (Eastwood, NSW: Baptist Historical Society of NSW, 1981), p. 63.

¹² Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 69.

¹³ Renwick, “Rev. John Saunders.”

¹⁴ *The Sydney Herald*, 30 July 1835, p. 1; also 6 Aug 1835, p. 1; 10 Aug 1835, p. 1, etc.

Seven weeks after the opening of the new building, the church was constituted with ten members. Saunders was the first of the ten names of foundation members entered in the new Roll Book of the church; his provenance was recorded beside his name as “Shoreditch and Camberwell.” The basis of their spiritual union was simply “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” words taken from Paul’s account to the Ephesian church recorded in Acts 20:21, “so that the church may consist of faithful men of different Christian denominations.”

The church’s confessional stance was, in fact, defined from its inception as adhering to the doctrinal emphases of the Particular Baptist Denomination and the Shorter Westminster Confession, except where they supported infant baptism or forbade open communion and fellowship. As Australian Baptist historian Ken Manley has pointed out, this was clearly the approach Saunders favoured: “He had no problem in avoiding subjects which might engender divisions in a ‘mixed’ church. His sole object was to lead people to Christ.”¹⁵ In a sermon published in 1842, Saunders declared:

We are not, as some pretend, to lead men to the Divine Redeemer by the instrumentality of sacraments; but are to conduct men to sacraments, by first leading them to Christ. Neither are we to attempt merely to turn men from one party to another or to proselyte them from one sect to another. The Lord Jesus reproved the spirit of proselytism, which is so apt to usurp true zeal for religion, and which animated bigoted and ungodly men in his days. He clearly intimated that fervent attachment to a creed may be co-existent with the greatest baseness ...

Unless our adherents become such from intelligent conviction, and unless, in their devotedness to our views, they are deeply imbued with Christian love, they are likely to bring discredit upon the principles we profess, and may, in the end, abandon them with the precipitancy with which they embraced them.¹⁶

Church growth under Saunders

Saunders was not one to adopt a half-hearted or partisan approach to mission or ministry. He was a liberal-minded leader inspired by the eighteenth-century evangelical theology to which he had warmed in England, and operated on the basis of confident Baptist (that is, separatist) convictions. Evidently a good orator and strategist, he was apparently irenic toward those with whom he disagreed. As church historian Heather Vose has observed, “denominational advance for its own sake had little interest for Saunders, and he is not remembered for reasons directly related to his confessional affiliation.”¹⁷ In Saunders’ own words:

Obliged to take a denominational badge in an age of so many divisions, ours indeed is a Baptist communion; but we consider ourselves entitled to a higher distinction; we pursue a nobler aim than the extension and perpetuation of sectarian differences; we assume, and desire to maintain, the style and dignity of a Christian Church; we claim fellowship

¹⁵ Ken R. Manley, *In the Heart of Sydney: Central Baptist Church 1836-1986* (Glebe, NSW: Australian Baptist Publishing House, 1987), p. 19.

¹⁶ John Saunders, “Invitation to fellowship: A sermon, preached at the Baptist Chapel, Bathurst Street, on the Lord’s Day, 7th August 1842, by John Saunders” (Sydney: Kemp & Fairfax, 1842), pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ Heather Vose, “Australian Baptists in the 19th century,” in Michael Petras (ed.), *Australian Baptists Past and Present* (Eastwood, NSW: Baptist Historical Society of NSW, 1988), pp. 11-12.

with the Church universal, and we are willing that any member of that spiritual body shall claim fellowship with us.¹⁸

The church prospered under Saunders' ministry. Some did not regard him as an eloquent preacher, though others thought he preached with great power.¹⁹ He was apparently well liked and worked hard on a wide ministry front. By 1847 there were 124 members. In addition to regular Sunday services and fellowship meetings, Saunders took an interest in Sunday School teaching, conducted twice each Sunday to a wide cross-section of the children of Sydney. In July 1843 there were 55 boys and 41 girls enrolled; by 2 January 1848, the day of Saunders' departure, these had risen to 105 and 63 respectively. Church records indicate that Saunders was the Sunday School examiner, but he may not have taught the classes each week. Subjects were wide-ranging. On one occasion his subject was transubstantiation; on another he warned the children "against the prevailing sinful amusements of the times such as theatres, cards, dances, balls, billiards, and especially against a fancy (sic) Ball to be given by the unwise Mayor of Sydney."²⁰

As it grew, the Bathurst Street Church commenced Baptist works in other locations. As well as serving the needs of a rapidly growing metropolis (with a large influx of voluntary immigrants), Saunders had "a passion to reach the lonely settlers in New South Wales" and was concerned for "the destitute state of many parts of the colony, where brethren [i.e. fellow Baptists] had settled, as regards religious instruction."²¹ Of particular concern were the settlements of Wollongong, Smithfield, Liverpool and Parramatta. Saunders and his church laid the foundations for the growth of Baptist churches in these and other parts of the colony of NSW, an achievement that, along with his pioneering work at Bathurst Street, led future generations of NSW Baptists to consider the Bathurst Street Church as "the mother church of the denomination."²²

Theological challenges

Differences on the application of doctrinal distinctive ascribed to John Calvin, and to his followers, was a major cause of dissention and schism among colonial Australian Baptists. John Saunders and his Bathurst Street congregation were not immune from these. Like most English Baptists of his time, Saunders subscribed to the (Calvinistic) Particular Baptist tradition, but soon after his arrival in Sydney he felt the holy wrath of Baptists from another congregation in the town who refused to cooperate with him, and was obliged to clarify his theological views.²³ As he put it, the group "refused to cooperate with me because they were of the hyper-calvinistic Order."²⁴

Theological differences in those days often coalesced around a church's policy regarding membership and communion. This is illustrated by the assessment of the Revd Allan W. Webb (1838-1902), a Baptist minister instrumental in the formation of the South Australian Baptist Association, who in 1869 distinguished three policy approaches by Baptist churches in Sydney:

¹⁸ Cited in J.D. Bollen, *Australian Baptists: A Religious Minority* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1975), p. 10. The words derive from the text of Saunders' sermon, "Invitation to fellowship," p. 14 (see below for full reference).

¹⁹ Murray, *Australian Christian Life from 1788*, p. 116.

²⁰ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 79.

²¹ *A Century of Baptist Witness in Sydney: The Story of the Bathurst Street Church, 1836-1937* (Sydney: Australian Baptist Publishing Service, 1937), p. 7.

²² On Saunders and his support for church planting see Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, pp. 83-89.

²³ Letter from John Saunders to Miss Saunders, 26 Jan 1835, in Letter Book, MS B1106, Mitchell Library.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

- (a) *Bathurst Street*: open membership and open communion (where “the sentiments of the pulpit are anti-Calvinistic”);
- (b) *Castlereagh Street*: close (i.e. closed) membership and communion (“of the hyper-Calvinistic type of theology”); and
- (c) *Harris Street*: close membership and open communion.²⁵

Such differences became public knowledge and weakened the organic unity of the churches and their mission in the community, as well as encouraging movement of individuals and families from one congregation to another with the attendant severing of social relationships. Saunders viewed such dissent as counterproductive to the evangelical cause, but evidently was unable to bring about consensus between the leaders of the various groups. Forced to take sides, he took a position opposing a strong Calvinist theology and ecclesiology. Similar problems over membership and communion were experienced by Baptists in other colonies and in Britain and elsewhere at the time. Ken Manley and Michael Petras suggest that, in view of these tensions and dissensions, the permanent establishment of the Bathurst Street Church was “a tribute in no small degree to its first pastor’s wisdom in successfully accommodating within his congregation the heirs of divergent traditions among British Baptists.”²⁶

A sample evangelistic sermon

Saunders was reputed to preach in a manner “characterized by great power and impressiveness.”²⁷ Unfortunately, although he appears to have preached from a full manuscript, little of his Christian prose is accessible today. We have only two full sermon transcripts, one on Aboriginal justice and the other on the need for conversion to Christ. The latter renders both his commitment to evangelicalism and his genial nature crystal clear. On Sunday 7 August 1842, his sermon at the Bathurst Street Baptist Church was titled, “Invitation to fellowship,” based on Numbers 10:29.²⁸ A transcript of the sermon was published by Kemp and Fairfax in the same year, along with the explanatory note that it was “somewhat enlarged from the original notes, and published at the request of the Deacons and Members of the Church and congregation.”²⁹ The sermon gives us a partial insight into the essential style, passion and thought of John Saunders.

Saunders dispenses with preliminaries and begins: “You are witnesses, my friends, how carefully I have abstained, in my public ministration, from all topics of a sectarian nature. I have acted thus because the first object of the ministry is to lead men to Christ.”³⁰ His first concern is not to grow Baptists but Christians. At this point in his ministry, however, Saunders is moved to call those in his audience who are “unconnected” with a Sydney church to join the Bathurst Street Baptist

²⁵ *Victorian Baptist Magazine*, June 1869.

²⁶ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 91.

²⁷ Murray, *Australian Christian Life from 1788*, p. 116.

²⁸ “And Moses said unto Hobab, the son of Raguel the Midianite, Moses’ father in law, We are journeying unto the place of which the LORD said, I will give it you: come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the LORD hath spoken good concerning Israel” (Num 10:29, KJV).

²⁹ Revd John Saunders, “Invitation to fellowship: A sermon, preached at the Baptist Chapel, Bathurst Street, on the Lord’s Day, 7th August 1842, by John Saunders” (Sydney: Kemp & Fairfax, 1842). The transcript of the sermon is supported by a large number of (mostly New Testament) references displayed as footnotes. Inscribed at the top of the front page of my copy are the words, “To the well beloved George Washington Walker, Esq., from the Preacher.” Washington (1800-1859) was the son of a Parisian Unitarian who married a Quaker and arrived in Australia in about 1831. In 1834 he settled in Hobart where he worked as a draper and opened a savings bank. Like Saunders, Washington’s social concerns included temperance, education, penal reform, destitute women and the treatment of the Aborigines. See http://www.utas.edu.au/library/exhibitions/quaker/quaker_biographies/quaker_biog_gw_walker.html (accessed 29 Oct 2009).

³⁰ Saunders, “Invitation to fellowship,” p. 3.

Church. He traces the context of the biblical passage, and briefly expounds the text, suggesting that Moses reasoned with Hobab, a Midianite who had rendered admirable service to the Israelites, to remain with them on the grounds of benevolence and self-interest.³¹ The “plain” application of the narrative, Saunders suggests, is “an invitation to Christian fellowship,” hence the sermon title. Then, “in humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit for light and power,” he preaches on three aspects of the verse.

First, he speaks of “a goodly company” (pp. 8-16) – the Church Triumphant, but also “any smaller and visible assembly of believers.” For him, a church is “an assembly of sincere Christians, who associate in the name of their Master, to worship him, to celebrate his ordinances, and for purposes of mutual edification.”³² He refuses, on biblical grounds, to recognise as churches “what are called National Churches, or [...] any known hierarchy.”³³

He outlines the essential functions of his own local church, including worship, celebration of believer’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper, proclamation of the Word of God, prayer, “[entering] into a covenant against all wickedness,” and the godly exercise of church discipline. He explains his church’s practice to seek to ensure that only born-again and baptised Christians whose faith is “exemplified in a holy life” may be admitted to church membership. This countered a common misrepresentation in the community that believer’s baptism was the first and only requirement for membership).³⁴ Yet “We call no man common or unclean, but are ready to receive all who have received the Holy Ghost as well as ourselves.”³⁵ The church is a community on a journey; “every member has renounced the world, and has taken the pilgrim’s staff.”³⁶ Enemies, difficulties, peril and extremity are to be expected, but God protects and provides for the church.

Second, Saunders speaks of “A fair prospect” (pp. 16-21) – the anticipation of the joy and rest afforded by heaven, and heaven’s King, at death. “As Israel realized Canaan, so the Christian expects to inherit Heaven.”³⁷ He emphasizes the free, gracious nature of the divine gift of eternal life made possible through “the ransom wherewith [Christ] redeemed the Church.”³⁸ He concludes this section with the words:

Can anything be more ravishing than the hope of these pilgrims? The beauty of Canaan was but a faint shadow of the glory that is to be revealed. It is Heaven – Heaven rendered sure by the Word of God, endeared to us by its being a gratuitous mercy, and made doubly dear as the purchased possession of the Son of God.³⁹

Third, Saunders speaks of “A kind invitation” (pp. 21-35) – Christians, and especially pastors, appeal to “thoughtless men” to repent and be saved, moved “by a sincere desire for [their] brother’s welfare.”⁴⁰ A note of apocalyptic conflagration is also sounded, along with an analogy to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and a plea for sinners to “flee from the wrath to come.”⁴¹ But that is not all:

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 11. He also quotes the Nineteenth Article of the Westminster Confession at this point.

³³ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴¹ Ibid.

[t]he Church is also influenced by love ... Urged, therefore, by the jeopardy of the sinner, by the command of his Lord, and by love to souls, the Christian may turn to the worldling, and give him the kind invitation; – Come thou with us; be a Christian; serve God in the spirit, and have no confidence in the flesh. Repent and be converted, when times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord. Renounce sin and embrace Christ. Abandon your guilty and dangerous position, and begin a pilgrimage to heaven.⁴²

There is an invitation also to “children of God,” “brethren” who “travel the same road.”⁴³ Saunders outlines various benefits of local church fellowship,⁴⁴ and observes that baptism does not exempt a Christian from participating in the Lord’s Supper, just as “your being a communicant at the Lord’s table will not exonerate you from the duty of being baptised.”⁴⁵ A third invitation extends to the prospect of “usefulness” promoted by united Christian fellowship – that is, “If you are Christians, you possess a zeal to glorify God, you pity the ungodly,”⁴⁶ and join with other like-minded believers to welcome God’s kingdom and do God’s will.

Saunders then embarks on a series of challenges and exhortations.⁴⁷ Of particular interest is his reference to God’s purpose in providentially placing Baptists in Sydney:

Be equally solicitous to cultivate the spirit of love; present an attractive aspect to the world, and to the Universal Church ... Your position at the great inlet of emigration; at the haven of intercourse with missionary stations, and with half-civilized and barbarous tribes; and your establishment in the metropolis of a rising state, render the exhortation more important.⁴⁸

Finally, Saunders warns non-Christians of the danger of their unpreparedness for death and divine judgment, urging them to turn to God and embrace the Christian gospel:

My friends! as certainly as time carries you to the grave, ruthlessly resists your struggles, and denies all entreaties for a delay or a return, a certainty of which you are now painfully conscious, so remorseless death, with inexorable pertinacity, will sweep you down to perdition ... Pause, O sinner! and consider thy ways! Awake, O sleeper! arise and call upon thy God, if so be that he will be merciful unto thee. The mercy of the journey and the blessedness of the inheritance will then be thine. For the Spirit and the Bride say *come*, and let him that heareth say *come*, and *let him that is athirst come*; AND WHOSOEVER WILL, LET HIM TAKE OF THE WATER OF LIFE FREELY.⁴⁹

It may seem significant that, at one point in this sermon, Saunders describes Hobab, the Midianite, as “a native occupant of the wilderness [invited] to join the privileged company, and obtain the blessings they hoped for.”⁵⁰ Was Saunders anticipating the reception of Aboriginal Christians into church membership? Probably not, as he goes on to describe “the sons of the desert” as “the man of the world.”⁵¹

⁴² Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 26. Both common spellings of “baptised” used in the transcript.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 28-33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 22.

Wider influence

Looking back after two years of ministry in Sydney, Saunders reflected that on arrival he had felt “unaided and alone.”⁵² Yet by 1842, at the age of 36, Saunders had clearly established his personal and professional standing in the community. He was “the leading Baptist of Sydney,”⁵³ and had become, in the eyes of his peers, the leading Baptist of the Australian colonies. He exercised influence in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, visiting and corresponding with Baptist leaders, and recommending ministers to churches seeking pastoral settlements. This was a strategic development, indicating his strong personal qualities and broad vision, since at the time NSW Baptists arguably suffered “the burden of minorityhood” with respect to the other Australian colonies, at least until the first decade of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Saunders travelled to Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) and Port Philip (Melbourne, Victoria) to encourage new Baptist work in those rapidly expanding colonies. He convinced several Baptists to emigrate from Britain to New South Wales. These included his own brother Alfred and his daughter Sarah, James John Glassop (1807-1894), and James Hugh Palmer (1818-1906), all of whom became members of the Bathurst Street church. Glassop had been converted through the open air preaching of John Saunders in London when Saunders was aged 24.⁵⁵

In addition to his spiritual ministry, Saunders was deeply committed to social justice or social responsibility, matters addressed in the second half of this chapter. Poor health, perhaps intensified by the relatively warm and humid Australian conditions, was his greatest personal impediment. It seems that he suffered from a form of nervous exhaustion. Descriptions of the symptoms are brief and inconclusive, but he may have experienced what we would call burnout. In 1845 he spent some time at Hobart for the “benefit of his declining health, his nervous system having been greatly enfeebled by his long residence in this hot climate.”⁵⁶

Ill health eventually led Saunders to resign from the church at the end of 1847 and return to England early the following year with his wife and daughter Elizabeth (later Lady Renwick), who had been born in Sydney.⁵⁷ A few days before their departure, the church arranged a large public farewell at which the NSW Attorney-General, John Hubert Plunkett, Q.C. (1802-1869) presided. Saunders was presented with a substantial gift of £300, accompanied by an address conveying his supporters’ gratitude for his “zealous and persevering services in the cause of temperance, and also of his efforts to promote the intellectual, social and moral well being of the community.”⁵⁸ Sadly, there was no reference to his Baptist work in the associated press report.⁵⁹

Return to England

Saunders had every reason to be satisfied with the progress and achievements of his ministry in Australia, and relieved at having secured a suitable successor to the pastorate in the person of the Revd John Ham, whom he inducted into the ministry of the Bathurst Street Baptist Church on 2 January 1848. He presented Ham with the Pulpit Bible and Hymn Books, the “Livery of Leisin” of

⁵² *The Baptist Magazine* (1836), p. 114. This was a British publication.

⁵³ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁶ Manley, *In the Heart of Sydney*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ A son, born before Elizabeth, had died at birth.

⁵⁸ *A Century of Baptist Witness in Sydney*, p. 10.

⁵⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Dec 1847.

the land granted to the church, and the keys of the building.⁶⁰ But his personal reflections on leaving Sydney after 11 years, and his judgment of the worth of his Australian ministry, are lost to history. Back in England, he resumed his legal practice and served as a Baptist minister in several suburban London churches. His daughter Elizabeth attended a ladies' school kept by Miss Maclaren, the sister of the eminent Baptist preacher and author, the Revd Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910).⁶¹ Saunders retained a strong interest in the colony, and, as death approached, "he hoped he might return to 'that bright land' where he should have preferred to have his 'dust laid'."⁶²

This was not to be, and he died in London on 1 May 1859, leaving his wife destitute. "God alone can tell what will become of us," she wrote to Australian friends.⁶³ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, whose first shorthand reporter, James Hugh Palmer (1818-1906), was a member of the Bathurst Street Church during Saunders' pastorate, and whose proprietor, John Fairfax (1804-1877), had been a strong supporter of Saunders, immediately opened a subscription list and sent her £650. They remained in England until Elizabeth turned 17, then returned to Sydney, where in 1868 Elizabeth jr married (later Sir) Arthur Renwick (1837-1908), the famous Glasgow-born doctor, politician and philanthropist whom John Saunders had known during his time in Sydney.

PART 2. "Struggling amidst a vast whirlpool of iniquity and pollution": John Saunders and social action

John Saunders' passion for social action appears to have been as strong as his zeal for evangelical ministry. He evidently viewed neither as ancillary in the life of a Baptist minister. There is no indication that the church members or deacons were of the opinion that their pastor's social activities absorbed time better spent in evangelism, pastoral visitation, sermon preparation, prayer, and the like. The church acted to alleviate poverty, but this was a financial matter that required ongoing management and discretion. Generally the church focused on worship, prayer, preaching and child education.

The silence regarding Saunders' notable social action may arise from congregational indifference, a desire for separation of the 'sacred' from the 'secular,' or respect for the private judgments of the pastor. Saunders was regarded as a gentleman in the colony who seems to have remained master of his time with respect to pastoral duties and public service. We may never know the reason for the silence, but the church records appear to make no reference to the public issues of temperance, transportation, Aboriginal justice, and education.⁶⁴ There is reference to the church's attempts to alleviate poverty (more on this below), but this was a practical financial matter that required ongoing management and discretion.

Narelle Iliffe proposes another reason for tacit church support of Saunders' social action. For many nineteenth century Protestants, moral behaviour, good works, social respectability and increased

⁶⁰ Manley, *In the Heart of Sydney*, p. 26.

⁶¹ Renwick, "Rev. John Saunders."

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

wealth were signs of divine grace. Members of the free churches took their faith and ethics especially seriously. Further, as Iliffe observes,

During the 1830s ... nonconformist men and women engaged in new methods of social control which challenged the hitherto accepted right of the Church of England to dictate on moral matters. By advocating sobriety, social respectability and family values the temperance movement helped create a social order which, coincidentally, benefited small-businessmen and trades-men. It advocated the growth of public libraries and mechanics institutes, encouraging literacy among the lower classes ... John Saunders' close involvement with temperance earned him the respect of the wider community and attracted the attention of business people from a variety of backgrounds to the Baptist cause.⁶⁵

Whether small business owners and their employees and families became members of the Bathurst Street Baptist Church because of Saunders' social action and influence is a matter of surmise. However, it is conceivable that his natural talents, nonconformist convictions, social conscience and professional office worked together to the perhaps unexpected mutual benefit of church and community.

The impetus for Saunders' social concern arose before he left England. In a letter dated 13 May 1834, he demonstrated not only a keen pastoral interest in antipodean social life, but also a mind already grappling with the spiritual and moral challenges, and the unprecedented opportunities for evangelical witness and colonial progress, which he expected to face on arrival:

Australia affords a fine field of Christian exertion ... the messenger of truth enters into a place where, in many respects, 'Satan's seat is,' [an allusion to Rev 2:13]; he stands in the gap to prevent his fellow-countrymen from falling back into barbarism, or from descending into the level of degraded and forced-labour population. Moreover, in so doing ... he forms the society of a state rising in extent, in commercial prosperity, and destined to bless or be the bane of many generations.⁶⁶

The writings of the Revd John Dunmore Lang also influenced John Saunders. A minister of the Church of Scotland, Lang arrived in NSW in 1823 and swiftly "became one of the most influential, determined and colourful figures in the life of the colony."⁶⁷ Saunders' decision to sail for the Parramatta River instead of the Ganges was apparently inspired by his reading of Lang's *Historical Account of New South Wales*.⁶⁸ He certainly envisaged Christian mission as including the social transformation of the colony against various forms of barbarism, destitution and the degradation of the human person. He saw the potential for good and evil in the common life of the colony, and strove to magnify the good.

From what we know of his life and ministry, in addition to his various Baptist activities, Saunders was active in the Bible and Tract Societies, the Auxiliary of the London Missionary Society, the Temperance Society, and the Benevolent Society.⁶⁹ He took a strong interest in the welfare of Aboriginal people, the abolition of the convict system, the cause of British immigration, and general education and science. As the Revd Wilfred Jarvis observed in the centenary publication of

⁶⁵ Narelle Rosevear Iliffe, "The first fruits: Baptists in New South Wales to about the 1850s," MLitt thesis, University of New England, Armidale, 1997, p. 33.

⁶⁶ *The Baptist Magazine* 26, June 1834, p. 257.

⁶⁷ Iain H. Murray, *Australian Christian Life from 1788: An Introduction and Anthology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), p. 111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶⁹ Murray, *Australian Christian Life From 1788*, p. 116.

the Bathurst Street Church, Saunders “always gave his ready assistance to the various religious and philanthropical movements then struggling for existence.”⁷⁰

Temperance

Possibly the most visible evidence of corruption and human misery in Sydney during the 1830s was public drunkenness. Saunders estimated that, in 1832, the year of his arrival, an astonishing 73 per cent of state revenue (of £122,000) was derived from alcohol consumption and associated agencies.⁷¹ This was also the age of the infamous “rum currency,” or at least within living memory of its heyday.⁷² The widespread misuse of alcohol, in particular spirits, in turn led directly or indirectly to other socially irresponsible, morally degrading or physically debilitating habits on the part of many in the community. Leading English Baptists concluded that:

It is almost unnecessary to speak of the state of religion in such a condition of society. The few individuals who maintained a higher character were struggling above water amidst a vast whirlpool of iniquity and pollution.⁷³

It is unsurprising, then, that Saunders applied himself to the cause of temperance.

In the 1830s temperance was not total abstinence – the latter was advanced by a different association, the Total Abstinence Society. Temperance advocates were often middle-class professionals and businessmen who permitted the consumption of wine and beer in moderation but abstained from distilled liquors except for medical purposes. Historians have placed Saunders’ active interest in the temperance movement between 1838 and his departure from the colony in 1848, but he assumed a leading role in the Temperance Society in January 1835, within weeks of his arrival at Sydney Cove. The movement itself was in its infancy, having been created in America and Britain in the late 1820s, and in Sydney at about the time of his arrival.⁷⁴

The first public action recorded of Saunders in Sydney was his seconding of the following motion by the Revd John Dunmore Lang at a meeting of the Temperance Society during the first week of 1835:

That the abolition of the practice of furnishing merchant vessels with ardent spirits, or employing men who use spirits to navigate them, would greatly promote the interests of the Colony, annually save many useful lives, and much valuable property, as well as greatly improve the moral habits of seamen.⁷⁵

The motion was presumably carried, and Saunders’ advocacy of temperance in Sydney grew in strength. Early in December 1835, Saunders presented a lecture on temperance to a “very numerous” audience at the home of Mr George Bunn, reiterating the sense of the January motion and demonstrating his detailed knowledge of matters maritime and intemperate. He acknowledged

⁷⁰ *A Century of Baptist Witness in Sydney*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 19.

⁷² The practice of using rum as an incentive payment or an article of barter was widespread in the colony, especially before 1807 when Governor Bligh banned its traffic. See, e.g., A.G.L. Shaw, “1788-1810,” in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1974), p. 37. Historian Manning Clark also refers to convicts who sold their labour “not for a mess of pottage but for buckets of rum.” C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia I: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962), p. 137.

⁷³ *The Baptist Magazine* 28, March 1836, p. 113.

⁷⁴ Ken Manley and Michael Petras state that a branch of the Temperance Society was formed in Sydney in May 1834; *The Sydney Herald* of 8 Jan 1835, p. 2, refers to recent meetings of the Temperance Society, described as “in its infancy,” at the Court House in Castlereagh St. See Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 59.

⁷⁵ *The Sydney Herald*, 8 Jan 1835, p. 2. Others present at the meeting included Revs Cowper, T. Hassall, McEnroe and Richard Hill.

the problem of alcohol abuse in the colony, and perhaps naïvely advocated substitution with “tea, coffee, etc.” He applauded the American mercantile navy’s “great progress” on temperance, and related stories of “deplorable calamities which have occurred at sea, solely attributable to the intoxication of the ships’ crews.” He revealed that several local ship-owners had signed a temperance pledge to discourage the use of “spirituous liquors” among their employees. The newspaper editor wrapped up the account by adding:

We wish these gentlemen every success in their laudable undertaking; but we rather opine, that, if they have not already a sufficient number of ‘hands’ on board, they will find some little difficulty in making up the compliment from among the Sydney blue-jackets, who are, to a man, ‘rum customers’.”⁷⁶

On 23 December Saunders delivered a temperance address on board the *Wolf*, a whaling ship berthed at Port Jackson, “at the close of which a number of shipmasters and sailors signed articles – including the whole of the crew of the *Wolf*.”⁷⁷ Subsequently the vessel was despatched as the first commercial “dry ship,” provisioned with dried fruits, coffee and “other wholesome and nutritious articles” in place of rum.⁷⁸ So deleterious was alcohol abuse to the common good that, as the editor of *The Sydney Herald* put it, if money was “said to be the ‘root of evil,’ intemperance is the trunk, and upon its branches hang the fruit of every other vice ... spreading misery and destruction to the human race.”⁷⁹ Commissioning the *Wolf* for her new service, Saunders said:

May she return with serenity above, and with peace resting beneath her swelling canvas; may health beam upon each countenance, and joy sparkle in every eye; and while she bears her captain and crew to the Australian shores magnanimous victors of a debasing custom, may she lay the wealth of an *Argosy* at her owner’s feet! Thus she will become the liberator of the seamen of this port, and the successful return of the first Temperance ship prove an illustrious era in the maritime annals of the Colony.⁸⁰

Saunders served as Secretary of the Society for many years, and from 1838-40 was founding editor of *The Australian Temperance Magazine*, a monthly publication with a circulation of up to four thousand. In fact, it was Saunders who moved (seconded Dr Nicholson) that the NSW Temperance Society publish a periodical to support its work (one thousand copies, 16 pages, at two pence subscription), to commence from 1 July 1837.⁸¹ Interestingly, the meeting also resolved that “all political and religious controversy shall be carefully excluded – a preference that matches Saunders’ usual mode of operation. Two years later, amid disquiet over the intentions of the Anglican Bishop of Australia, William Broughton, and his Catholic counterpart, Bishop John Bede Polding (who became Australia’s first Catholic Archbishop in 1843) regarding support for the movement, Saunders entreated members to remember that “it was the happiness of the Temperance Society that it knows no difference of religion – no party feeling.” The motto of the Society was “love one another.”⁸²

Perhaps the most revealing published statement on temperance by Saunders was made at a meeting of the Parramatta Temperance Society on 8 May 1839, where he moved that women be invited to join the movement, and defended the view that spirits were inherently harmful, opining that:

⁷⁶ *The Sydney Herald*, 17 Dec 1835, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *The Sydney Herald*, 31 Dec 1835, p. 2. A “skeleton” of his lecture was published on the same page.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* The only alcohol on board was reputed to be medicinal spirits in the hands of the ship’s surgeon.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *The Sydney Herald*, 29 May 1837, p. 2.

⁸² *The Sydney Gazette*, 13 Apr 1839, p. 2.

Every plan for the improvement of man and the advancement of morality ought to have the sanction and support of the community at large, and the ministers of religion in particular ... spirit is the work of man and not of God, it does not exist in healthy nature ... spirit is not a good creature of God for the purpose of refreshment – but only in a medicinal point of view, and the use of this substance as a beverage is of itself an abuse ...

As to the objection that Temperance usurped the place of the Gospel, [Saunders stated that] Temperance was an auxiliary not a usurper. The Society was founded upon the principle of self-denial, and the holy motive of love to God, and love to man. And if men thought it a Christian duty to support hospitals and benevolent asylums, it was a far higher duty to *prevent the necessity for such institutions*.⁸³

Also in 1839, Saunders reported to the General Meeting of the Temperance Society that auxiliaries had been formed at Maitland and Port Phillip, and that, if an “efficient agent” could be found, more would be formed at Yass and Goulburn.⁸⁴ At the same meeting, Revd John McKenny moved that “every minister of religion and every sober person is called upon to exert himself in promoting the objects of the Temperance Society [because intemperance opposed] progress of religion, the education of youth, and the good government of the Colony.” Mr Richard Windeyer seconded the motion, noting that “We cannot expect to have many Saunders’, but we have many ministers, although they may not, like Mr Saunders, have burning words to express their glowing thoughts.” The motion was carried.⁸⁵

On another occasion, at the 1840 Half-Yearly meeting of the Temperance Society, the Attorney-General moved that the Australian colonies found “a temperate community in the Southern Hemisphere.” Saunders seconded the motion and, in

a long and powerful speech against the principle of granting licenses [to sell alcoholic beverages], kept the audience in a laughing mood by narrating a number of pointed anecdotes in his best style. He also adverted to the monopoly which the Society sought to break up, among the publicans by competing against them.⁸⁶

Saunders’ editorials for *The Australian Temperance Magazine* provide further evidence of his detailed knowledge of temperance issues and commitment to the cause, though they are not analysed here. Governor Gipps, who normally chaired meetings of the Temperance Society, declared Saunders the indispensable “life and soul” of the executive of the Temperance Society, and described his incessant travelling, lecturing and calling on people to sign temperance pledges.⁸⁷ At a meeting of the Society on 8 June 1838, Gipps himself publicly signed the temperance pledge.⁸⁸ In December 1847, the Sydney magazine *Heads of the People* published a written appreciation of Saunders, along with a fine line drawing, describing him as “The Temperance Advocate.” At his farewell in January 1848, he was praised by Sydney’s gentry as the “apostle of Temperance.”⁸⁹

There was no unresolved tension in Saunders’ mind between his ministry from the Bathurst Street church and his activities on behalf of the temperance movement. Moreover there is no indication

⁸³ *The Sydney Herald*, 10 May 1839, p. 2; original italics.

⁸⁴ *The Sydney Herald*, 12 Apr 1839, p. 2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *The Sydney Herald*, 21 Sep 1840, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 60.

⁸⁸ This historic pledge was inherited by Saunders’ granddaughter who donated it to Sydney’s Mitchell Library.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

that his church members, to whom he was responsible, and who had the power to dismiss him, disapproved of his strong interest in the cause. But evidently there was criticism. On one occasion it was claimed that the Temperance Society was unscriptural; Saunders responded by observing that the Bible Society too was not mentioned in the Bible, adding, "Let those who apply this razor shave themselves with it, and they will be pared down pretty close."⁹⁰ On another occasion Saunders defended his actions against the charge that he placed the interests of the Temperance Society above those of the Christian gospel, claiming that:

The Gospel is the grand moral remedy for the world; it is more, it is the 'power of God unto salvation.' The Gospel is a Divine ordinance, concerned to renew the heart. But the Temperance movement is 'the handmaid of the Gospel.' God has blessed the cause. Many who have turned to temperance have subsequently turned to Christianity.⁹¹

There are hints that Saunders addressed the subject of temperance in sermons at Bathurst Street as well as at meetings of the Temperance Society and in other places. For example, in April 1840 *The Sydney Herald* uncharacteristically announced that the Reverend Saunders was to preach a sermon at the Baptist Chapel on the Christian duty of supporting temperance societies.⁹² Unfortunately we know nothing of the content of the sermon nor the reason why Saunders chose to speak on the topic at that time.

Normally news stories about temperance appeared on page two of the newspapers, under "Domestic intelligence." But on 19 April 1841, the whole of the first page of *The Sydney Herald* was devoted to a report of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the NSW Temperance Society. The most likely reason for this unusual change in editorial policy is that Governor George Gipps, the Society President, took the opportunity in the meeting to render high praise to Saunders, the Society Secretary. In doing so he reveals something of Saunders' humble nature as well as his tireless commitment to the work. In particular, Gipps noted that "the modesty of their excellent secretary" had previously prevented any recording of the manner in which office bearers had discharged their duties. Gipps further observed that "it was principally owing to the unremitting attention and perseverance of the Reverend gentleman (Mr Saunders) that the Society was indebted for the important position which it already occupied amongst our Colonial Institutions."⁹³

Indeed much progress had been made. In a speech to the Temperance Society in July 1841, at the Sydney Mechanics Institute, Saunders (who chaired the meeting) drew attention to "the great change which has taken place in Sydney since the Society had been formed about seven years ago, when he arrived in the colony." Quickly appraising the tragic situation upon arrival, he had initially estimated that it would take twenty years for the cause to succeed, but now he believed "the work would be done" within three years because of "unexpected success" and "a most efficient coadjutor in the Sydney Total Abstinence Society." Also he noted that "several vessels had lately left the Colony with rum as a part of their cargo, it being found that it could not as heretofore be sold to advantage in Sydney."⁹⁴ Sadly the work was never finished and Saunders continued to fight the liquor trade and its vested interests for the rest of his time in Sydney.

A final comment must be made about the Sydney Total Abstinence Society, of which Saunders was not a member. This Society was formed in September 1838 with eight members, and by May the following year membership had reached 204 and meetings were held weekly at the School of Arts.

⁹⁰ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 61.

⁹¹ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, pp. 60-61.

⁹² *The Sydney Herald*, 15 Apr 1840, p. 2.

⁹³ *The Sydney Herald*, 19 Apr 1841, p. 1.

⁹⁴ *The Sydney Herald*, 17 Jul 1841, p. 2.

The Society's primary object was "tee-totalism," or the eradication of all alcohol consumption from the colony. It appears that members of this Society occasionally criticised the Temperance Society and its members, and vice versa. For example, at a meeting of the Total Abstinence Society in May 1839, Revd John McKaeg (Saunders' unofficial predecessor who had been imprisoned for unpaid debts and had attempted suicide) addressed the gathering at considerable length:

[He] advocated the cause because he had derived great benefit from it, having acted upon the principles of the Society two years before the Society was formed ... drunkards are all men of the highest intellect ... a species of Alexanders the Great, who finding the intellectual world not big enough for them to sit down and weep for want of something to employ their ideas, and then take to drinking; the old Temperance Society is not sufficient to reclaim drunkards, it is humbug; it forbids one kind of intoxicating liquor, but allows others ... If asked what good Teetotalism had done, he [McKaeg] would say look round the room and see the reformed drunkards, but where are the converts of the old Temperance Society, there are none.⁹⁵

McKaeg addressed another meeting of the Total Abstinence Society on 2 July 1839, but there is no record of what was said and that is the last we hear of McKaeg in Sydney.⁹⁶ Saunders and others sought to avoid wars of words between members of the two societies and, while there were occasional negative comments from time to time, McKaeg's May 1839 tirade was the most extreme comment published.⁹⁷

What of John Saunders' other social concerns? Ken Manley describes him as "a good example of the moderate Particular Baptists, liberal in his churchmanship, evangelical in theology and evangelistic in his preaching, a thoughtful leader in the community, not afraid to champion issues of social justice."⁹⁸ Like his ministerial colleague, the Revd John Dunmore Lang, we have every reason to believe that Saunders was "a man of many parts, fearless in his convictions."⁹⁹ Those convictions rarely led to theological disputation or political controversy; in both public and private life Saunders was a moderate and a pragmatist. He does not appear to have pressed an overtly political agenda in his social action, in contrast to many fellow Baptist ministers in England and Wales, of whom at least one in four were said to have been actively involved in secular politics between 1810 and 1850.¹⁰⁰

Saunders may, as Ken Manley and Michael Petras have suggested,¹⁰¹ have been influenced by a turn toward humanist moral enlightenment, "which started to replace the traditional conservatism of the established Church of England and the political radicalism of some Catholic and Dissenting spokesmen" in the first half of the nineteenth century, and which eventually gained traction in

⁹⁵ *The Sydney Herald*, 24 May 1839, p. 2. The ten governing rules of the Sydney Total Abstinence Society appear in *The Sydney Herald*, 28 Nov 1840, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *The Sydney Herald*, 5 Jul 1839, p. 2.

⁹⁷ These two references to McKaeg, previously undocumented, indicate that McKaeg was released from prison, perhaps in 1837, and may have remained in Sydney for some years. His subsequent movements and date of death are unclear. See Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, pp. 38-52, especially note 54.

⁹⁸ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity'*, p. 35.

⁹⁹ Quoted in a display of John Dunmore Lang memorabilia, crypt of St Stephen's Uniting Church (formerly Presbyterian), Macquarie St, Sydney; viewed on 6 March 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 209. Many of these ministers focused not on social justice generally but on addressing disadvantages faced by nonconformists as a result of legal discrimination on religious grounds in the 17th and 18th centuries.

¹⁰¹ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 58.

NSW.¹⁰² But he and others were more likely borne along by practical necessity and opportunity rather than ideology, as secular historian Michael Hogan points out:

There is no doubt that many colonial thinkers preferred a morality based upon secular reason to any denominational version. But there is some argument about whether the dominant ideology of the time put religious and secular leaders into opposing camps. One of [Michael] Roe's case studies serves as a good example. He has difficulty in explain how the temperance movement, which he sees as the product of the secular 'moral enlightenment,' was really inimical to the basic religious principles of the main churches. Yet it is much easier simply to accept that the moral leaders of society – secular, Protestant and Catholic – were in fundamental agreement about the need to react against a feature of colonial life which was endangering conventional morality, civil order and economic productivity. Nor was a vision of a sober society the only dream that was common.¹⁰³

We have seen already an indication of the assurance and diligence with which Saunders supported the nascent temperance movement in Sydney. Indeed he became its chief advocate and spokesperson, and it seems the drink traffic was his overriding social concern. But there were four additional areas of social responsibility which exercised his conscience and attracted his leadership and lobbying abilities during his ministry in the colony: Aboriginal reconciliation, convict transportation, poverty alleviation, and public education.

Aboriginal justice

It is Saunders' interest in the human rights and welfare of Indigenous Australians (he would have called them Aborigines) that has received the greatest attention during the past half century. His compassion for Aboriginal people is reflected in his correspondence.¹⁰⁴ He was a founding member of the Sydney branch of the London-based Aborigines' Protection Society (an international human rights organisation founded in 1837 to protect the health and well-being and the sovereign, legal and religious rights of indigenous peoples subjected by colonial powers, an organisation which continues to do good work today as Anti-Slavery International).¹⁰⁵ He supported the Revd Christopher Eipper's German Mission to Aborigines (formed in 1838 and located at Moreton Bay, now Brisbane).¹⁰⁶ He was associated with the Native Institution at Parramatta (established by Governor Macquarie in 1814, on the recommendation of Congregational missionary and trader William Shelley, to "civilise, Christianise and educate" Aboriginal children).¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately we know virtually nothing of his activities on behalf of these institutions, nor the content of any public addresses he may have presented in association with them.

¹⁰² Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 75, quoting Michael Roe, *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia 1835-1851* (Parkville, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1965).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See Saunders Letterbook, a collection of correspondence and other documents (1834-1856), held by the Mitchell Library Sydney, but not consulted for this paper.

¹⁰⁵ See <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/catalogs/collections/detail/Aborigines-Protection-Society.shtml> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

¹⁰⁶ See Christopher Eipper, "Statement of the Origin, Condition, and Prospects of the German Mission to the Aborigines at Moreton Bay," 16pp ms, 1841.

¹⁰⁷ See Upper Parramatta River Catchment Education Resource Kit, section C8, "Social history overview," Sep 2002; available at <http://www.uprct.nsw.gov.au/PDF/Info%20Sheets/Catchment/C8%20-%20Social%20History%20Overview%20%2B%20Aboriginal%20history.pdf> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

But there is one important document that sheds considerable light on Saunders' interest in Aboriginal justice and reconciliation. His sermon (one of only two extant sermons, the other mentioned above) drawn from Isaiah 26:21¹⁰⁸ and preached at the Bathurst Street Chapel on Sunday 14 October 1838, has possibly achieved as wide an audience today as any Baptist sermon preached in Australia with the exception of sermons preached by the Revd Billy Graham during his Australian crusades. Three republications of this sermon, usually titled "Claims of the Aborigines," are worthy of note.

First, the Sydney weekly newspaper, *The Colonist*, founded by the Revd John Dunmore Lang in 1835, published a transcript of the sermon over three issues on 17, 20 and 23 October 1838. Second, to commemorate its 75th anniversary in 2001, the Baptist Union of Australia published a booklet edited by Jill Sutton and titled, *Rev John Saunders: a beacon light and some Baptist reflections*. The booklet included extracts from the sermon and brief commentary by Lowitja O'Donohue, David Hunter, Tim Costello, Liz Rushen, Kate Hunter and Thorwald Lorenzen.¹⁰⁹ Third, in 2004, Sally Warhaft included a slightly different set of extracts from Saunders' sermon in her edited book, *Well May We Say... The Speeches That Made Australia*.¹¹⁰ Church historian Ken Manley described the oration as "one of the most important sermons ever preached by a Baptist in Australia."¹¹¹ General historian Henry Reynolds judged the sermon to be one of the period's "most eloquent presentations of humanitarian doctrine."¹¹²

Why was this sermon promoted by the contemporary press and lauded by future generations of Baptists? The text which Saunders selected offers a clue. Although he never mentions it in the edited transcript, there is little doubt that he was reflecting, at least in part, on a horrific event that took place 18 weeks previously at a sheep station at Myall Creek, near Inverell (in what is now northern NSW). On 10 June 1838, eleven white ex-convict settlers and one free man (John Fleming) murdered 28 Wirrarrayaay people, allegedly in response to cattle theft. The massacre was reported to the local magistrate and subsequently to Governor George Gipps, who was urged in July by Attorney-General John Plunkett to pursue a criminal investigation into the allegations.¹¹³ Remains of the victims were found and eleven men were captured (but not Fleming, who was never caught), and sent to trial on 15 November 1838. A jury found all eleven not guilty. One of the jurors later told the press that he could never convict a white man of killing a black man. He said,

I look on the blacks as a set of monkeys and the sooner they are exterminated from the face of the earth, the better. I knew the men were guilty of murder but I would never see a white man hanged for killing a black.¹¹⁴

At the time, although the crown did not recognise Aboriginal title to the land on which they lived, the law did regard Aboriginal people as human beings, subjects of the King of England, and entitled to the protection of English law. Thus the unlawful killing of an Aboriginal person was regarded as murder.¹¹⁵ Before the men could be released from custody, Plunkett ordered that seven

¹⁰⁸ "For, behold, the LORD cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain" (Isaiah 26:21, KJV).

¹⁰⁹ The booklet's contents were also made available on the website of Canberra Baptist Church. See <http://www.canbap.org/resources/issues/issues8.html> (found on 28 Sep 2007).

¹¹⁰ Sally Warhaft (ed.), *Well May We Say... The Speeches That Made Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2004), pp. 314-319.

¹¹¹ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity'*, p. 30.

¹¹² Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 24.

¹¹³ Plunkett chaired Saunders' farewell meeting in 1847.

¹¹⁴ Parliament of New South Wales Hansard, 8 June, 2000. See

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20000608005> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

¹¹⁵ Keith Windschuttle, "The myths of frontier massacres in Australian history. Part 1: The invention of massacre stories," *Quadrant*, October 2000 (Sydney Institute), available at <http://www.sydneyle.com/Massacres%20Part%20One.htm> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

of the men be charged with the murder of one of the children who had been killed. A second trial, which took place on 29 November 1838, found the seven guilty and they were hanged on 18 December.¹¹⁶ This act, the first state-sanctioned killing of Europeans convicted of murdering Aboriginal people, caused controversy throughout the colony and led to heightened racial tensions and hardened settler attitudes towards Aboriginal people for many decades.

I relate this tragic history because it is important to understand the context in which Saunders preached his great sermon on Aboriginal justice. He did so 18 weeks after the massacre and four weeks before the first trial commenced, amid significant community ferment at the prospect of unprecedented action by the state, racial unrest and potential economic uncertainty. Probably Saunders also had in mind other reported instances of violence and injustice perpetrated against Indigenous people by the colonists; 1838 was one of the bleakest years for black-white relations in Australia.¹¹⁷

The sermon is rationally crafted, theologically informed, anthropologically sophisticated (for its time), socially progressive and – so far as can be ascertained – unprecedented in its demands for justice and restitution. It would have been impressive and challenging, to the congregation who first heard it preached from the Bathurst Street pulpit. That a sermon of such gravity and power flowed from the mind and pen of a NSW Baptist minister is equally impressive today. The published sermon transcript, which amounted to 4,513 words, is available on the Baptist Historical Society website.¹¹⁸

In his first three sentences, Saunders outlines the biblical, deontological and evangelical thrust of the sermon. First, he defines his subject as the colonists' duty toward the "Aboriginal natives." Second, he claims this as an aspect of Christian ministry. Third, he links obligation to pursue Aboriginal justice to the Golden Rule (Mt 7:12), and to God's universal offer of salvation (1 Tim 2:4). He acknowledges Aboriginal people as "the original proprietors of the soil," each of whom, as "a fellow-creature," is entitled to justice. Taking Isaiah 26:21 as his text, he makes the following observations:

- (a) God is just and applies retributive providence to the nations;
- (b) the colony has sinned by killing Aboriginal people, and its citizens await divine retribution;
- (c) the colonists may avert this retribution by repentance and restitution.

Saunders contends that the Aboriginal is "neither monkey, ape, nor baboon," nor "an intermediate link between man and the brute," but human. He or she is "the descendant of a common ancestor – our brother [or sister] upon earth, and possessed of a joint title to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus and to an inheritance in Heaven." Therefore, he argues, the Aboriginal person possesses "all the natural rights which belong to humanity, and is entitled to all the charities which man is bound to show to man." Yet European colonists have perpetrated the following grave human rights abuses against these innocent people:

- (a) "we have robbed him without any sanction ... we descended as invaders upon his territory and took possession of the soil";
- (b) "we have brutalised them" – introducing them to alcohol, fraud, dishonesty, theft, bribery, licentiousness, profligacy;

¹¹⁶ For more information on the massacre see <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/myall-creek/index.html>, <http://www.newagemultimedia.com/isaacs/MyallCrk.html>, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myall_Creek_massacre (accessed on 29 Oct 2009). A memorial to the victims was unveiled at the site of the massacre on 10 June 2000, and the site was included on the Australian National Heritage List on 7 June 2008.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_massacres_of_Indigenous_Australians,

¹¹⁸ <http://www.baptisthistory.org.au/articles/00005.pdf> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

- (c) “we have shed their blood” – not murdering individuals alone but systematically and disproportionately “eradicating the possessors of the soil” by musket, bayonet, sword and poison, at places such as Hawkesbury, Emu Plains, Bathurst, the Hunter and “the South.”

National humiliation and repentance toward God is the only valid way to avert divine retribution for this evil, says Saunders. But that is not all, for “repentance supposes reformation, and where injuries have been inflicted it involves recompense,” or restitution:

we cannot make an atonement for the lives which have been taken, neither can we make reparation for the multitudes which have been hastened to the tomb by the profligacy we have taught them, but we can at least, bestow upon the survivors the blessings we enjoy. We have a boon in our hands above all price, Christianity, and the numerous comforts which flow from it, and which are comprehended in the expressive word civilization. We are required to protect the natives from further aggression, and shed upon them every blessing within our power.

These blessings include evangelism, conversion and spiritual formation. In evangelising Aboriginal people, NSW Baptists will

gather into the fold of Christ the remnant of the tribes destroyed by us. In failing to attempt this, we resign an injured portion of our race to deep and long protracted misery, but in carrying out these views we not only make some reparation, but may be the instruments of incalculable good.

So the sermon ended. We do not know how it was received by his primary audience, but only days later Saunders became of the founding members of the Sydney branch of the Aborigines’ Protection Society, which provided a formal structure through which to pursue social reform. It would be interesting to compare a list of names of foundation members of the Society with a list of members of the Bathurst Street Church in 1838, but I am not aware that such a list exists.

We should not think of Saunders as a lone voice speaking against the murder of Aboriginal people and the theft of their lands. Others expressed similar sentiments. An anonymous letter from “Hunter’s River” to the editor of *The Colonist*, reprinted in *The Sydney Herald* in January 1839, stated that the earlier treatment by Europeans of Indigenous Australians amounted to wholesale dispossession and murder. The writer also mentioned the failure of the colonial government to “provide food for the blacks,” and accuses the government of being “the first party who invaded this territory – in almost every settlement they have made, the government have destroyed the first inhabitants.” The author claims, as Saunders had claimed in his sermon three months previously, that God will judge the colonists for their injustice, but goes beyond Saunders in warning that the divine judgment would be dispensed in a forthcoming “exterminating war waged by the blacks against the whites indiscriminately.”¹¹⁹

Yet such advocacy of Aboriginal justice by European colonists was uncommon. Many probably preferred not to discuss race relations openly, and some expressed an opposite view. In 1842, the local Debating Society held a debate in Sydney on the question, “Have the Aboriginal Blacks an indefensible right to the Soil of Australia?”¹²⁰ That the question was posed in this way suggests the approach favoured by many in the community. If Saunders had participated, he would have preferred the no case – and he may well have attracted a hostile crowd. Indeed, so strong was his

¹¹⁹ *The Sydney Herald*, 30 January 1839, p. 2.

¹²⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1842, p. 2. *The Sydney Herald* changed its name to *The Sydney Morning Herald* from Monday 1 August 1842.

criticism of the Myall Creek murderers and those who expressed support for them that *The Sydney Herald* sued him for libel.¹²¹ As *The Herald's* editor opined in 1841:

We have repeatedly maintained and will maintain on the principles of just and rigid logic, that the mere fact of a certain tribe or a number of tribes of the black aborigines having, in their wanderings, arrived first – before any white men, at Botany Bay or Port Phillip [the site of Melbourne's settlement], gives them no priority of right – no paramount right to the soil of Botany Bay or Port Phillip, so long as they add nothing thereto in the way of improvement. The whites, by their improvement though they arrived second in point of time, have acquired a right to the soil where they have improved it which is good in law, equity, and common sense, against the whole fraternity of prior black wanderers.¹²²

On the basis of the arguments in his sermon, Saunders would have denied the validity of such claims on the grounds of natural justice and divine revelation. It is to our collective shame that, more than 170 years later, certain Australian political leaders and scholars continue to deny the genocide, ignore the injustice, refuse to make apology, and support radical policies which would further suppress and oppress Indigenous Australians. Saunders' challenge to his congregation at Bathurst Street, Sydney, in 1838 remains pertinent today.

Convict transportation

Between 1831 and 1835 there were 8,140 migrants from Britain to NSW; in the next five years their number rose to 29,663, and the rise was to continue as authorities realized the importance of free settlers to the economic and moral success of the colony. By 1847 it is estimated that there were 153,894 people in NSW, of which 51.6 per cent were free settlers.¹²³ There was a degree of social engineering in the colonial immigration program, and evangelical ministers helped to progress it, as historian of Puritanism Iain Murray observes:

Lang returned repeatedly to Britain chiefly to crusade for able Christian immigrants and for evangelical ministers ... he came early to share the view that without the arrival of a large number of free settlers it would be the outlook and standards of the convict class which would mark the nation of the future ...

It was thus clear to all who were concerned for the Christian future of Australia that more than the conversion of a few individual convicts was needed if the prevailing moral climate of the country would be changed. As free settlers were the backbone of the first churches in Sydney and Parramatta, so it would be upon large numbers of such people that the future chiefly depended.¹²⁴

For John Saunders, who shared Lang's vision for a growing population of free Protestant settlers, the very notion of convict transportation was anathema. On board the *George Hibberd* on his outward voyage to Australia in 1834, as chaplain to the 144 female convicts, Saunders had witnessed firsthand the deplorable conditions in which they were held, and on arrival in Sydney he saw further evidence of barbarity and inhumanity by convicts and captors alike. In his letters he

¹²¹ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1990), p. 36.

¹²² *The Sydney Herald*, 16 March 1841, p. 2.

¹²³ Murray, *Australian Christian Life From 1788*, p. 113.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

frequently referred to the jangling of convicts' chains as they were marched by his house.¹²⁵ He used his standing as a minister and his connections to push for the abolition of the convict system – which, in contrast to the defence of Indigenous people, was becoming increasingly popular as the colony began see more and more free settlers arriving and began to prosper. By early 1838 even *The Sydney Herald* was enthusiastically advocating the immediate and total end of transportation, along with “an extensive flow of emigration, in order to neutralise the effect and influence of large bodies of convicts.”¹²⁶ The paper enthusiastically (though prematurely) declared the end of transportation in October 1839.¹²⁷

There were regular long editorial articles, and transcripts of meetings and reports of the Transportation Committee, in the press in 1838 and 1839. Saunders and others would have read these with interest. On 19 February 1839, for example, *The Sydney Gazette* declared that

The moral reformation of an offender is seldom or never effected [through convict labour], as is abundantly proved by every part of the Evidence taken before [the Transportation] Committee... Transportation is not merely inefficient in demoralizing those, whom accidental circumstances, more than a really vicious nature, have seduced into crime. It is hardly needful to point out, how this must necessarily be the result of crowding together multitudes of offenders during the idleness of a long voyage, of a life in a colony, where vice is the rule and virtue the exception...¹²⁸

When in 1846 a petition favouring abolition was presented to Governor Fitzroy containing 6,765 signatures, Saunders was one of ten community leaders selected to deliver it.¹²⁹ For Saunders, public advocacy of the abolition of transportation served two purposes: it addressed a grievous injustice deeply entrenched in British politics and society, and it nurtured hopes of a new society in which the gospel might flourish.

Saunders was not narrowly Eurocentric in his outlook, much less xenophobic. He sought to befriend and assist newly arrived immigrants from England and Wales, and perhaps from Western Europe, but also expressed the possibility that emigration schemes to bring cheap labour from Bengal and Chinese from Singapore might encourage the Baptist Missionary Society to send missionaries to Australia. As he put it, “perhaps the hills of India are to be converted by husbandmen in New South Wales.”¹³⁰ His missionary vision seems never to have left him. But he certainly recognised the advantage of building on a foundation composed of free settlers rather than convicts.

Poverty alleviation

Saunders' family in England were wealthy business people living in Finsbury Square, London, with good connections that enabled him, at the age of 28, as we have seen, to be offered a seat in Parliament despite his nonconformist credentials.¹³¹ His experience *en route* to Sydney, and on arrival in the colony, where conditions were generally crowded and unhealthy, and at times brutal,

¹²⁵ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 58. No reference to the source in the Saunders Letterbook is given.

¹²⁶ *The Sydney Herald*, 22 February 1838, p. 2.

¹²⁷ *The Sydney Herald*, 9 October 1839, p. 2.

¹²⁸ *The Sydney Gazette*, 19 February 1839, p. 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* See also p. 63, n. 20.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³¹ *The Australian Baptist*, 12 January 1937, p. 5; see also B.G. Wright, “Saunders, John (1806-1859),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (vol. 2; Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967), p. 418, available at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A020373b.htm> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009).

would have made an impression on his consciousness. The Sydney folk he first observed were, in his estimation, “so thin, so sunburnt and many of them so drunk – not a lady to be seen, hardly a woman. It appeared as if we had landed among a set of the most degraded and uncomfortable beings.”¹³² Many went hungry; disease was common; many infants died in the late 1830s and early 1840s. For an evangelical Baptist such as Saunders, the first duty was to proclaim the gospel story and call people to follow Christ, and to gather the saved into the congregation of the church. The next duty was to care for the temporal needs of the community. For Saunders, the gospel required both. For early nineteenth-century Baptists, evangelism was one dimension of a wider social vision often conceived as “benevolent effort.”¹³³ To this task Saunders devoted himself.

During Saunders’ ministry the Bathurst Street Baptist Church established a “Poor Fund” to assist the destitute. In addition to this, which may have served a relatively small number of people, Saunders himself was active on several benevolent fronts. He was a member of the Benevolent Society, the colony’s leading charity, established in 1813, which had strong connections with the churches.¹³⁴ The 1831 Annual General Meeting of the Society reported that, during the previous year, the Society had sheltered, fed and clothed 146 persons in the Benevolent Asylum.¹³⁵ The latter was a hospital for the terminally ill, although others may also have been admitted to its care.¹³⁶ We find Saunders, at the Society’s Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Friday 22 June 1836, supporting a motion thanking chaplains and other ministers for promoting the work of the Benevolent Society in their congregations, and seeking authorisation “to request sermons to be preached and collections to be made” at the year’s end to aid the Society.¹³⁷

In May 1839, Saunders’ brother Alfred, who had emigrated to Sydney, is listed as a member of the Committee of the Sydney Dispensary, but John’s name was not.¹³⁸ At the Benevolent Society’s 1839 AGM, held in the old Court-house in Castlereagh Street, Saunders noted a “great influx” of immigrants to the colony, and a corresponding increase in the prices of goods and services. Many new arrivals were ill and had little ready cash to spend. Some found it difficult to obtain reasonable employment. The report of Saunders’ address to the meeting reflects his characteristic optimism and compassion:

The change in climate upon many of the immigrants who arrive in a destitute condition, has a very bad effect, and produces dysentery. Objects of charity repeatedly present themselves to many, to such an extent as to tire even charity, but if there is union all can be relieved. If the price of provisions continue at their present value, he was afraid that there will be a great deal of destitution and misery in Sydney, and consequently many demands upon the Society’s funds.¹³⁹

In August 1839, Saunders was present at a public meeting in the Market-place called by leading citizens “to take into consideration the best mode of affording relief to persons labouring under distress occasioned by the pressure of the times.” The colony suffered a severe economic

¹³² Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 69.

¹³³ See, for example, *The Baptist Magazine*, January 1831, p. 14. Quoted in David Bebbington, “The Baptist conscience in the nineteenth century,” *Baptist Quarterly* 34 (1), January 1991, p. 14.

¹³⁴ The Society, Australia’s oldest charity, still operates; for more information see <http://www.bensoc.org.au/director/aboutus.cfm> (accessed on 29 Oct 2009). Several other charities operated in Sydney during the 1830s and 1840s, such as the Sydney Dorcas Society. See *The Sydney Herald*, 20 July 1842, p. 3.

¹³⁵ *The Sydney Herald*, 27 June 1831, p. 2.

¹³⁶ A long list of the causes of death of persons admitted to the Benevolent Asylum for the year ending 30 June 1841 appears in *The Sydney Herald*, 3 August 1841, p. 2.

¹³⁷ *The Sydney Herald*, 25 July 1836, p. 2.

¹³⁸ *The Sydney Herald*, 29 May 1839, p. 2.

¹³⁹ *The Sydney Herald*, 29 July 1839, p. 4.

depression in the years 1839-40. The meeting was presided over by the Bishop of Australia, William Broughton, and was attended by the Colonial Secretary, the Sherriff, and many others. The meeting established the Sydney Association for the Temporary Relief of the Poor, and elected Saunders to its administrative committee.¹⁴⁰ Two months later, *The Sydney Herald* reported that the Bathurst Street Baptist Church had given £20/0/0 to the subscription fund of the Association, comparable to the donations of other Sydney churches with the exception of the St James Church (Church of England), which had given £64/16/6.¹⁴¹

Saunders was also present, again as a member of the committee, at the first annual meeting of the Sailors' Home, held at the Mechanics School of Arts, and chaired by Saunders' friend, Captain J.L. Innes, the Superintendent of the Sydney Police.¹⁴² The Sailors' Home was a boarding house "wherein the seaman could be rendered comfortable and be protected from the fell influence of the crimps."¹⁴³ There was always much benevolent work to be done in colonial Sydney, and Saunders appears to have been consistently close to the centre of such activity, often in administrative and inspirational capacities. No doubt he was appreciated by benefactors and recipients alike. In this he demonstrated the best of the evangelical tradition of attending to both the rescue of the soul and the rescue of the body in the name of Christ.

There were times when even the leaders of benevolent institutions despaired at the challenges facing their community and the lack of human and financial resources with which to do good. It often fell to Saunders to inspire the crowd and show the way forward. For example, at the Annual Meeting of the Benevolent Society in July 1842, the President, Mr McLeay, began speaking desultorily of the situation at hand, and continued in such a critical manner that Saunders, the Secretary, was obliged to interrupt and lift the spirits of the meeting. The action caught the attention not only of the members but of the media, who reported it in the next day's newspaper. Saunders observed to his listeners that

he could not harmonise with the desponding note which had been struck by the Chairman, and he was sure that their President would rejoice with him, if they were able to go forth from this meeting with the assurance that the objects of the Benevolent Asylum would be more than ever advanced.¹⁴⁴

Saunders drew attention to the large number of people assembled for the meeting, "despite chill in the air," and hoped that recent low interest in the Society would "precede the rising of the sun of Christian charity and benevolence, which would soon spread its most brilliant beams over the whole of this colony."¹⁴⁵ Such were Saunders' charms when called upon to change people's outlook in dark times.

Public education

Finally we turn to education as an example of Saunders' commitment to social responsibility. There are two aspects to this: his work with the Australian School Society to limit state funding of schools and Church of England influence on education policy; and his public lectures. Saunders

¹⁴⁰ *The Sydney Herald*, 5 August 1839, p. 2.

¹⁴¹ *The Sydney Herald*, 28 October 1839, p. 2.

¹⁴² *The Sydney Herald*, 1 January 1841, p. 2.

¹⁴³ *The Sydney Herald*, 6 July 1840, p. 2. "The crimps" appears to be a reference to card cheats (and therefore to unscrupulous gambling), although other meanings may have applied.

¹⁴⁴ *The Sydney Herald*, 28 July 1842, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

was also a keen observer of Australian flora and fauna, and recorded many perceptive descriptions in his letters home, but these are not considered here.¹⁴⁶

As Ken Manley and Michael Petras have noted, Governor Richard Bourke proposed important reforms to colonial school education in 1836, and these were vigorously opposed by Saunders and other Protestants. However, when Bishop Broughton sought to promote an exclusively Anglican school system, Saunders became his chief opponent in meetings of the Protestant Association, which had a role in defending Protestant interests in the wider society and also strengthening cooperation between Protestants, who could at times be fractious and prone to narrow self-interest, especially where matters of religious conscience were in flux.¹⁴⁷ Saunders insisted to Broughton and the rest that “times had changed and dissenters would never gather like chickens under the wings of the Church of England.”¹⁴⁸

Saunders became a leading member of the Australian School Society, whose patron was the Governor, George Gipps, a generous personal benefactor of the Society who had also authorised “a liberal Grant of Land for the site of a Central School Establishment.”¹⁴⁹ At a meeting of the Society in 1839, Saunders emphasised that it was not sectarian in nature and that “the only difference it knew was, scriptural or not scriptural.”¹⁵⁰ He noted that the Society subscribed to the “Lancastrian system” of school education, which the former Governor had opposed. Saunders was elected chairman at the close of the meeting; his sister-in-law, wife of Alfred, was secretary of the Ladies Committee. Members included Captain Innes, Revds Mansfield and W.P. Crook, and “Miss Chisholm.”¹⁵¹

At a subsequent meeting of the Australian School Society in 1840, Saunders moved a motion “approving of the Christian religion, and condemning the infidelity and Latitudinarianism which proposed to exclude scriptural instruction from the schools.”¹⁵² He observed that progress in education had been hampered by what he called “the Demon of Discord,” which had

rekindled the flames of dissention anew, and now everything was receding and a divergent motion going on; and unless there was an exertion made to repress it, things would soon arrive at such a state that there would be nothing but anarchy and confusion throughout the length and breadth of the land.¹⁵³

The meeting appears to have fallen into disarray. Saunders implored “the friends of religion, and of the young” to lay aside their “petty bickerings and minor differences and unite their efforts, in order to achieve the introduction of a system of instruction adapted to the wants of the Colony.”¹⁵⁴ His diplomacy won the day and eventually a workable solution was proposed. Manley and Petras add that

In 1844 Saunders worked with the Independent Dr Ross in insisting that any denomination which wanted separate schools should provide its own funds. [Saunders] was a consistent advocate of the British and Foreign school system which dissenters in

¹⁴⁶ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 59. See also Saunders Letterbook.

¹⁴⁷ On church-based school education in the colony in the 1830s see Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand*, pp. 37-39, 49-52.

¹⁴⁸ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁹ *The Sydney Gazette*, 9 March 1839, p. 2.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* Although Caroline Chisholm arrived in Sydney with her husband and family in September 1838, and was very active in benevolent work, it is unlikely that the reference in the *Gazette* was to her since she was both married and Catholic.

¹⁵² *The Sydney Herald*, 6 May 1840, p. 6. The parent society of the Australian School Society was the British and Foreign School Society.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Britain supported so completely. His involvement in this issue which so clearly involves Church-State relationships was significant in many ways...¹⁵⁵

Many Baptists had a strong interest in self-improvement, and a chief means of this was literacy and liberal education. Indeed, as church historian Joe Coker observes,

The fact that temperance and education were the two main issues that piqued the social conscience of Baptists [in the nineteenth century] reflects this increased emphasis upon individual self-improvement ... [They focused on] social problems that could be mended by reforming the individual rather than the ones that would require systemic changes in industrial society ... Like other non-conformists, Baptists believed that the primary cause of poverty was not industrial society but ‘the individual moral weakness of each poor person.’¹⁵⁶

I suspect that Saunders implicitly shared this conviction. But as well as preaching for conversion to Christ and to encourage personal holiness, initiatives in liberal education, including adult education, were another means by which he could improve the lot of ordinary working-class and middle-class men and women, and thereby help to reform the wider society. And public lectures, especially if they were transcribed and published in the press, could help to raise his profile and circle of influence both among the general reading public and among the political class. Saunders gave regular public lectures, usually at the Mechanics School of Arts Hall, of which his brother Alfred was a committee member. Subjects included geography, chemistry, biology, “paleography” (ancient methods and materials of writing, a subject in which he appears to have possessed considerable fluency), telegraphy, and the new science of aerodynamics.¹⁵⁷

However, the responsibilities of pastoral ministry occasionally intruded on this general ministry, and when they did the lectures would halt. For example, he suspended his projected series of public lectures on palaeography in August 1838 on the grounds that “he could not again come before [his audience] without interfering with duties which he must always hold supreme.”¹⁵⁸

Whether these duties were of a pastoral or familial nature is unclear. The editor of *The Herald* added that “there have been no lectures delivered more likely to raise the character of the institution [that is, the School of Arts] than those delivered by Mr Saunders.”¹⁵⁹ The following week’s lecture was scheduled to be presented by Dr Wallace on the subject of phrenology.

Conclusion

The Revd John Saunders was clearly an extraordinary early leader of Baptists in NSW. In spiritual and temporal fields, he excelled amid difficulty and privation, and achieved lasting positive change for the glory of God, the development of the Baptist denomination, and the betterment of colonial society. On social issues his robust evangelical faith and enlightened social conscience united in vigorous pursuit of temperance, Aboriginal justice, an end to the convict system, increased European immigration, the alleviation of poverty and disease, and the education of children and adults.

¹⁵⁵ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 59.

¹⁵⁶ Joe L. Coker, “Social conscience and political power among nineteenth century English Baptists,” *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 1 (1), October 2005, p. 32.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, *The Sydney Herald*, 8 February 1839, p. 2; 30 September 1839, p. 2; 21 October 1839, p. 2; 23 October 1839, p. 2; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 1844; 13 July 1859. Edited transcripts often accompanied press reports of his lectures.

¹⁵⁸ *The Sydney Herald*, 15 August 1838, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Saunders maintained a balance between core evangelical distinctives, such as they were in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and the social expression of his evangelical convictions which led him to engage in various forms of social responsibility. He also recognised the importance of individual effort if the whole gospel and all its fruit were to be fully manifest. Yet he invested supreme confidence in the power of the Christian gospel to change hearts and to transform societies. An excellent example of this confidence is the address which Saunders presented at the Annual Meeting of the London Missionary Society's Australian Auxiliary in August 1842, meeting in the Revd John Dunmore Lang's church. Saunders described the work of the LMS as "supremely good," and observed that, if the church had worked to preserve herself from selfishness from the beginning,

we should not have heard in the present day of missions; for the work of evangelization would have been completed. But after the Gospel was first propagated, men seem to have forgotten their high responsibility, political ambition usurped the place of piety, and a desire for ecclesiastical rule stood in the stead of a regard for the salvation of men and the propagation of the Gospel.¹⁶⁰

Saunders then gave an account of the rise of modern missions in England, and their progress throughout the world, acknowledging that, while

we cannot expect fruit from a tree just planted – yet how much has been effected by the instrumentality of these societies. Aided by these, slavery was exterminated, the negro shook off his fetters and rose a free and joyful man; by these the suttee [the practice of widow burning] was abolished in India; the widow is now no longer bound to cast herself upon the fire; and although these practices may still in some degree continue, every succeeding suttee leaves the number less, so that very soon the funeral pyre will be lighted for the last time. Infanticide has also been checked in India and China, and must eventually be put to an end throughout the world. In speaking of what missionaries have done, I refer to the power of God, for we have learnt that it is not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the living God that these things have been accomplished.¹⁶¹

Saunders spoke further on the contribution of missionaries to science and trade, preparing the way (as he saw it) for the civilizing influence of British enterprise and commerce. The meeting concluded with an appeal by Major Sullivan for support of the colonisation of New Caledonia, and for "missionaries and pioneers to prepare the way by Christianising and civilizing the natives."¹⁶²

It has been claimed that the foundation for Saunders' social action was a secular "moral enlightenment, a 'new faith' incorporating notions of individualism, rationality, man's power to control his environment, the need for reform, the concept of progress."¹⁶³ Saunders was a person shaped by his time, but to set aside the biblical and theological foundations for his moral actions in favour of Kantian Enlightenment and Hegelian Progress, in the absence of conclusive supporting evidence, is in my view a serious error. The most perspicacious defence of Saunders' social views is his sermon on Aboriginal justice. His convictions about the need for social transformation, in that instance at least, clearly flowed from his evangelical understanding of Scripture, theology and ethics. I suspect his convictions on other aspects of social responsibility, and on pastoral ministry, and on the mission of the church flowed from the same spring.

¹⁶⁰ *The Sydney Herald*, 26 August 1842, p. 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶³ Manley & Petras, *The First Australian Baptists*, p. 58.

There is, of course, a temptation to assume that one man could hold together all the best values of a movement and thereby shape a denominational tradition in ways that are identifiable two centuries later. Saunders is not that man, unless we read back into his story, and the history of his time, those things that we want to see there and nothing else. There is also a temptation for latecomers to history to claim men and movements in an attempt to bolster claims which might have embarrassed the pioneers, and which they might well have disowned. And there is the historian's and biographer's constant temptation of misunderstanding the motivations of their subjects, and the contexts and networks of relations in which they thought and acted, and the selective retention of primary sources. In regard to Saunders, there is also the matter of large and important gaps in our knowledge of his life and work, and the paucity of detailed observations by those who knew him well. Despite all these qualifications and reservations, it is my hope that we now know and appreciate a little more of the man and his mission than we have hitherto known, and that this knowledge will spur us into action in the name of Christ for the common good.

Saunders was "a Christian gentleman who sacrificed possible worldly greatness for the service of Jesus Christ."¹⁶⁴ It is a pleasure to honour him as an early exemplar of evangelical excellence among the Baptist Churches of NSW and the ACT. It is entirely fitting that we honour his memory in launching the Annual John Saunders Lecture tonight with the presentation of this address, sponsored by the Social Issues Committee of the Baptist Churches of NSW and the ACT.

Reflecting on his witness to Christian social justice, the Revd Tim Costello noted, as President of the Baptist Union of Australia in 2001, that

[Saunders'] insistence on the truth so long ago reminds us that none of us working for justice is its originator, and that it is only by continuing to turn toward the same source of light as he did, that we can hope to reflect it. I pray that some of us will decide to become beacons of light for the generations to come.¹⁶⁵

Thank you.

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An earlier version of this address was published as a series of three papers as follows: "The ministry of the Reverend John Saunders in Sydney, 1834-1847 (part 1 of 3)," *The Baptist Recorder* 103, Aug 2008, pp. 1-10; "The ministry of the Reverend John Saunders in Sydney, 1834-1847 (part 2 of 3)," *The Baptist Recorder* 105, Feb 2009, pp. 1-7; and "The ministry of the Reverend John Saunders in Sydney, 1834-1847 (part 3 of 3)," *The Baptist Recorder* 108, Nov 2009, pp. 1-10.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Murray, *Australian Christian Life From 1788*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁵ Tim Costello, "Saunders as a 'beacon of light'," in Jill Sutton, *Rev John Saunders*, p. 11.