



## “As his wife lay in labour, Gouger administered oaths to create the British Province of South Australia

SUSAN MARSDEN IN MY VIEW



**BEGINNING:** The painting by Charles Hill, titled *The Proclamation of South Australia 1836*. While this ceremony was going on, Harriet Gouger was in labour.

**O**n a searing summer's day on December 28, 1836, a small group of Englishmen assembled inside an over-heated tent pitched near a dune on the southern Australian coast. In that same stuffy tent a young woman laboured to give birth to a South Australian son.

Who were these people, and why do we care?

When the *Buffalo* anchored in Holdfast Bay, Governor John Hindmarsh and Resident Commissioner Robert Fisher came ashore and walked to the camp set up by Colonial Secretary Robert Gouger.

In the hot tent, as his wife Harriet lay in labour, Gouger witnessed documents and administered oaths to his fellow Executive Council members - and so the government of the British Province of South Australia was established.

Gouger wrote in his diary: "At 3 o'clock ... the whole of the Colonists assembled in front of my tent. Before however reading the commission in public, I took the necessary oaths of office ... We

then held a Council in my tent for the purpose of agreeing upon a Proclamation requiring all to obey the laws & declaring the Aborigines to have equal rights & an equal claim upon the protection of the Government with the white Colonists.

"The Commission was then read in public, a 'feu-de-joie' was fired by the Marines ... & a salute fired by the ships."

Those events are celebrated in Proclamation Day, Australia's most enduring historical commemoration.

The event has also become a significant public recognition of Aboriginal South Australians, whose rights were proclaimed as Gouger described.

When this holiday became an annual event in the 1850s, the artist Charles Hill embarked on a 20-year project to paint a picture titled, *The Proclamation of South Australia 1836*.

I am writing a book about Hill's painting and the people he depicted, and would be pleased to hear from

the descendants of those Kurna or British observers.

And on behalf of the History Council of South Australia, I'd also like to invite other South Australians to embark on their own journeys of exploration from Proclamation Day.

Hill's painting is in the Art Gallery of South Australia, and Gouger's diary is held in the State Library.

On the internet you can read the colonists' own words in History SA's blog, *Bound for South Australia*, discover later histories written by members of the Professional Historians Association, or listen to stories recorded by Oral History Association members.

Join the National Trust or the Historical Society of South Australia, and enjoy events all through the year.

Take a break from the sun to visit heritage buildings, museums, and local history libraries.

There are hundreds to choose from, although, strangely, there's no Museum of Adelaide, nor

any longer a Mortlock Library of South Australiana.

As an independent voice for history, the History Council is advocating for a city museum and for a revived Mortlock Library.

Council members include the main organisations concerned with history and history-teaching in this state, heritage organisations and historical societies, professional and volunteer associations.

They supply scintillating ways to explore history - by learning, doing and seeing.

With the re-introduction of history as a distinct subject in schools, every South Australian child will join these historical activities. But they may ask (as my daughter has):

**WHY** are precious colonial cottages still being demolished?

**WHO** looks after our local history records?

**WHERE** can I find them?

**AND**, what happened to Harriet Gouger and her baby?

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