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COONAWARRA

THE LIFE OF JOHN RIDDOCH

John Riddoch is best remembered as being the founder of Coonawarra, but this achievement was just one brief incident in his full and fascinating life.

Born in Turriff, near the border of Banffshire and Aberdeenshire, on 27 October 1827, he grew up in the bleak Gaelic-speaking countryside of northern Scotland, where his father was a butcher and his siblings were domestic servants and farm labourers. He obtained sufficient schooling to learn to read and write, and was working as a 23 year-old brickmaker when news of the discovery of gold in the new colony of Victoria reached Scotland.

He quickly obtained an assisted passage, this still being the era of Highland Clearances, landed in Melbourne in March 1852, and without delay walked to the Bendigo diggings where he became proficient at the business of gold mining. He was consequently to the forefront of the rush to the Ovens Valley when it occurred later the same year, where he made at least one lucky strike, but was sufficiently astute to invest the proceeds immediately in a bullock wagon and became a trader and gold buyer on the diggings.

Riddoch prospered. Within two years he was able to establish himself both as a wholesaler in the port city of Geelong, where he supplied other bullockies who plied the western diggings, and also as a wholesale wine and spirit merchant. Significantly for his future initiatives, he became an expert in both the domestic and international wine trades.

He was now also in a position to marry the 24 year-old Elizabeth King from Dunblane, Perthshire, with whom he had fallen in love on board the migrant ship *Lady Elgin*. They remained in Geelong for eight years, until 1861, energetically consolidating their business before investing in the frontier enterprise of sheep-farming just over the border in the neighbouring colony of South Australia.

Elizabeth had ten children, five of whom survived, but she died relatively young in 1881, just one year after her family moved into their spacious new house at Yallum. She and her husband were noted for their hospitality, Adam Lindsay Gordon recalling that it was 'a blend of simple tastes and cultured pursuits'.



To escape the affectionate attentions of the children Gordon used to climb a tree in the garden to compose his poetry, and it was in the experimental arboretum nearby that the exceptional growth and productivity of the imported Monterey pines (*Pinus radiata*) were identified, which led to the establishment of the district's extensive forestry industry. The garden at the Katnook outstation was also significant, as it was here that John Riddoch initially associated the excellent quality of the fruit in the orchard with the unique terra rossa soil, for which Coonawarra has since become famous.

Wool prices in London were high. The dynamic and enterprising Riddoch, whose global perspective gave him the confidence to borrow heavily, proceeded to build up an extensive and efficient pastoral run of 123,000 acres (50,000ha) which carried 110,000 sheep and 3,000 cattle, and extended from Comaum in the north to the present Mount Gambier Airport in the south and Glencoe to the west. Combined with other land in the Tatiara and West Darling of New South Wales, his holdings would have rivalled the area of his native Banffshire.

However, to the uninformed observer, his grand ambitions present a paradox for, with the arrival of a railway in the district that permitted the establishment of more intensive industries, he immediately sub-divided 51,000 acres of Glencoe Station to establish a dairying industry and butter factory to produce the Keelap brand of cheddar cheese for export; an enterprise that made his concurrent 1,000 acre Coonawarra Claret project seem somewhat insignificant. It is ironic that this socialistic squatter should have become internationally renowned for one of his minor initiatives.

As proud as he was of his winemaking, Riddoch devoted the majority of his life to public service. Elected to the South Australian parliament in 1865 with his colleague and friend, Adam Lindsay Gordon, they were the first resident members prepared to make the hazardous sea voyage or uncomfortable and tedious coach journey to Adelaide to represent their district's interests. This he continued to do effectively and diligently for eight turbulent years.

Improved transport was naturally one of his initial aims, and he brought to the district its first roads, and eventually a railway, but his highest priority was always education. He frequently stated in his speeches that 'knowledge is power', and fought for free, universal, compulsory schooling for children, and Mechanics' Institutes and libraries for the education of adults.

He was also the inaugural chairman of the Penola District Council in 1869, a position he held, when other duties permitted, for a period of 25 years. Rather than become an absentee landlord, he chose to live within his own country community, and the numerous contributions he made to its development are still being recognised many years after his death. The Riddoch Art Gallery in Mount Gambier, which he founded in 1887, has been named after him, as was the Limestone Coast's main arterial road, the Riddoch Highway, which runs the length of his old fiefdom.

However, this outstandingly capable, intelligent and kindly man would probably have felt best rewarded in that his obituary in 1901 acknowledged him as being 'The Father of the South East'.