

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM
AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 10 NOVEMBER**

Present: The President, Dr Alison Alexander, in the chair and about 55 members and friends.

Apologies: Robert Dooley.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous meeting were read, and approved as a correct record.

Business: The President asked that those present who had enrolled for the March excursion to contact her later in the evening.

Speaker: The President introduced Ian McFarlane as a man of unusual and varied background; his doctoral studies at the University of Tasmania had led to a book on the Aboriginal tribes of north-west Tasmania. The topic of tonight's address was 'Adolphus Schayer: How Circular Head Led Tasmania and Victoria'.

Adolphus Schayer was born in Silesia in 1793, and came to Van Diemen's Land in 1831 as an employee of the Van Diemen's Land Company. Although his expertise was in care of sheep until 1835 Edward Curr directed that his chief duties be with cattle and horses; when at length he did tend the Company's sheep, he much improved their condition. All the while Schayer lived in near-isolation at Woolnorth Point, probably because that better suited his temperament and his desire to study natural history. In 1836 he published (in Germany) a paper telling especially of an Aboriginal corroboree he witnessed. Another spectator was George Augustus Robinson, but where as he dismissed the occasion as an 'entertainment', Schayer's account was much richer. He described the central figure as entering a kind of shamanistic trance; the whole group (including women and children) responded with near-frenzy, albeit with interludes of relaxation and laughter. Schayer's further comments indicated Aboriginals' worship of the moon, and their belief in spirits bad and good, the latter having given them human form. These were unique insights into the spiritual life of the Tasmanians.

Schayer also reported that the Vandiemonian settlers, restive under government's control and aware of the island's limited terrain, were looking to Port Phillip as early as April 1834. It is likely that Edward Curr was selling sheep to stock such ventures, possibly to his personal profit as well as the Company's. Fellow-residents at Circular Head with whom Schayer shared intellectual interests were Ronald Gunn and Joseph Milligan; through them he made further contacts, notably Dr James Grant of Launceston. On his return to Germany in 1843 he published several further papers on Van Diemen's Land. The first spoke especially of the work of the Tasmanian Society and its *Journal*, Schayer making the point that while local enthusiasts collected valuable data, its interpretation awaited analysis from British experts. Another paper discussed the Aboriginals of South Australia, a third the accounts of Tasmania by Lhotsky and Strzelecki. There may have been further studies, and research was proceeding as to that and other aspects of Schayer's life. Thus it had very recently been discovered that in Vienna there was held a collection by him of Tasmanian orchids, and that his original forename was the Jewish 'Abraham'. Research would also continue in Tasmania, one target being an archaeological dig at the site of the cottage at Woolnorth Point, scarcely touched since Schayer's day. Among the illustrations displayed were some of that site.

A highlight of question-time came as Dr Eva Meidl remarked that she would soon be in Austria, and offered to help with research, especially on the orchid collection. After further discussion, the President thanked the speaker for a 'truly enlightening' presentation, and the meeting closed at 9:05 pm.

**Michael Roe for Secretary
Alison Alexander, President**