

# Source Papers in Economic History

COLONIAL STATISTICS BEFORE 1850

N. Butlin, J. Ginswick and P. Statham

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## COLONIAL STATISTICS BEFORE 1850.

Australian statistics up to 1850 (and, indeed, to 1860) are a relatively undeveloped area. S.J. Butlin's book, *Foundation of the Australian Monetary System, 1788-1851* (Melbourne, 1953) is by far the most important published secondary source. However, this is essentially confined to money and banking and even then S.J. Butlin did not have access to the detailed British financial records. Coghlan in *Labour and Industry in Australia* (Oxford 1918) exploited rather than portrayed the available statistics. Several useful monographs exist presenting valuable statistics. Of these, perhaps two might be noted in particular: R.M. Hartwell, *The Economic Development of Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne, 1954) provides useful summary data; and B.R. Fletcher, *Landed Enterprise and Penal Society* (Sydney, 1976) deals with N.S.W. agriculture to 1821. Though other secondary sources are important in presenting important cross-section statistics or deal with short periods, they do not often yield the continuous time series sought for bicentennial purposes. For these series one must go to unpublished writings and, in the end, to the original sources.

The three authors of this section have drawn, where possible, on secondary sources both published and unpublished. In the main, however, they have gone to original records. Given the original research behind this section, the space constraints have been extremely frustrating. There are, indeed, masses of statistical data on early Australia. Only fragments can be presented here. What is particularly frustrating is the fact that even the sources of the data cannot be adequately indicated. This is because the nature of early statistics requires one often to examine a wide variety of sources in order to derive satisfactory series or to be confident that the numbers presented are accurate. Almost every series and, indeed, a great many of the individual numbers given in this section require extensive references that are not possible here within space constraints.

Of the various "original" sources, neither the *Historical Records of Australia* nor the *Historical Records of New South Wales* can be commended. These are incomplete, erratic and inaccurate sources. It is a minor tragedy that the costly project of reprinting these volumes has been undertaken when better alternatives for expenditure were obvious. The *Australian Joint Copying Project* of the National Library of Australia and the Library of New South Wales has transformed the access by Australians to their historical record. The mass of the statistics presented here come from this source. Nevertheless, even this source has been found to be seriously incomplete and it has been necessary to go directly to British records in the United Kingdom. There are, in fact, a great many records of central importance in the Treasury, the Home and War Offices and in other locations beyond the obvious Colonial Office Records that have not yet been microfilmed. One of the authors, Mr Jules Ginswick, has visited Britain on several occasions to make use of this additional material. None of this effort has been supported in any way by the Bicentennial History Project. Even so, much remains to be done. We take this occasion to direct the attention of the Joint Copying Project to much core material that has not yet been touched. The Bicentenary is, perhaps, an appropriate occasion on which to suggest a re-focussing of the efforts of this Copying Project.

It will be obvious that the statistics presented here extend far beyond the such sources as the *Blue Books* of the various colonies or the various returns of the Governors of the colonies. These *Blue Books* (variously titled) and the Governors' returns are, of course, fundamental sources. Much of the material presented in these sources needs to be checked, and often corrected, by reference to other returns and records, whether returns by various individuals in the colonies or records of officials in Britain who amended many of the figures returned to Britain.

In the limited space available for this section, it has been necessary to be highly selective. It should not be assumed that the statistical array presented here is the total of quantitative records of the early Australian colonies - far from it! We have concentrated on those series extending over the longest periods and even then the tabulations are highly condensed summaries. Thus behind the series of, for example, bond populations lie some 20-odd detailed series that could amplify this record. In the case of the summary records of

land grants and sales, almost fifty underlying series were assembled. The public finance records have been massively condensed. In this case, we have preferred to use, generally speaking, series in manuscript rather than those published in the *Blue Books*. Indicative of a different problem, several different series of Commissariat revenues and expenditures might be shown; we have had to be content with one. Even when such tabulations are made, there are major problems of interpretation. Thus, for example, bills drawn on Britain and issued by the Commissariats may seem to be straightforward, on the surface. Regrettably, this is a superficial impression. For example, the mass of bills *seem* to be issued to shippers supplying goods to the colonies, the goods being taken into the Commissariat for public purposes. In reality, it seems highly likely that apparent bilateral transactions conceal a complicated three- or four-way trade, with many of the apparently public imports ending in private hands. This is not the place in which these matters can be displayed or discussed. It is, nevertheless, necessary to warn readers against unduly simplistic interpretations of the statistical record.

Many of these problems will be dealt with following the publication of Mr Jules Ginswick's massive assembly of statistics of New South Wales. In the light of this prospective publication, many of the references in the Tables to follow are simply to *Ginswick Ms*. This work has greatly influenced the selection and emphasis of the tabulations in this section. Until comparably thorough and detailed work is done on other colonies, it is not possible to give a similar coverage to them. In any event, however, it has seemed appropriate in a bicentenary to give primary place to New South Wales.

This concentration on New South Wales is not as narrowing as it may sound. The original colony covered the whole of Eastern Australia until 1825 when Tasmania was separated. The original Port Phillip became the Colony of Victoria constitutionally separated in 1851, while the present Queensland remained part of New South Wales until 1859. In the meantime, the Swan River Settlement (Western Australia) was founded in 1827 and is represented here by statistics supplied by Dr Statham. South Australia was formed in 1837. For it, statistical records are much more sparse given its private enterprise origin.

Until 1850, New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land dominated the Australian colonies in terms of population and economic activity. This relativity is reflected in the space accorded, in these limited confines, to the different colonies.

The nature and quality of the early statistics warrants extended comment. One publication proposed separately by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to mark the bicentenary is the study by Drs C. Forster and C. Hazelhurst, delineating the growth of official statistics in Australia. This is to be published in the *Year Book Australia* in 1988. A preliminary version is given in C. Forster, "Australian Official Statistics 1788-1851" in *Working Papers in Economic History*, A.N.U. No 33, 1985.

Following the enquiry by J.D. Bigge, the coherence, but not necessarily the quality, of early statistics was greatly improved in 1822 and thereafter by the publication of *Blue Books* in the colonies. Until then, separate streams of information, misinformation and disinformation flowed to British officials covering the Commissariat (including Treasury Bill issues in the colonies), population musters, the status of the population whether convict, freed, free, and civil and military officials, births, deaths and marriages, persons on public rations, ship arrivals and departures, cargoes arriving and so-called public purchases of cargoes, convict assignments, public employment of convicts, infrastructure produced, local revenue raising, prices paid by the Commissariat and Commissariat purchases, land grants, acreages under crop and crops produced, livestock numbers and types of stock and immigration etc.

These flows were amplified in Britain itself by records of British spending, victualling and shipping agents and by paymasters along with such persons as the Colonial Agent transmitting salaries to the colonies. Enhancing these official statistics, the publication of newspapers, both official and private in the settlements provided supplementary records, including market activity. And private papers remain further extending the statistical record (e.g. *Macarthur Papers*).

From 1822, the coherence of the N.S.W. record appears to simplify the task of statistical historians. For many series this is true (and is subsequently true for the other colonies). Thus civil lists, land grants and fiscal records, for example, are generally, though

not always, coherently represented. Even so, there are some gaps and a good many inconsistencies. In the late 'twenties, trade statistics appear and the form of the *Blue Books* begins to assume, in primitive form, the appearance of the publications that later became the *Statistical Registers* of the various colonies.

Nevertheless, as the formal statistical administration took shape, government in N.S.W., in particular, lost control of much of the activity of the settlements. This loss of control had begun with the inland spread of settlement after 1813 and already, from that date, farming, assignment, ration and related data become increasingly suspect. The *Blue Books* recognised this problem by omitting large areas of information, particularly those relating to farming and livestock. They came to report, predominantly, the overhead administrative actions and the operations of the ports in the different settlements. In varying degrees, these problems afflict the *Blue Books* in all colonies, including Van Diemen's Land (beginning in 1822 in very limited form), in Western Australia in 1834 and in South Australia in 1840.

Partly compensating, a system of population censuses was initiated with the New South Wales census of 1828. Thereafter, frequent censuses were conducted in all colonies delineating not only the populations and their characteristics but also the economic activity of the colonies. Of these, only the detail of the 1828 census of New South Wales has come to light, providing a rich picture of the colony. It is difficult to believe that only this one census remains in detail though the authors have attempted to search for other census returns. This is a matter that the Joint Copying Project might consider, to search for and possibly recover similar detail for subsequent years.

It might be noted that certain statistics of pre-1850 are included elsewhere. These are "synthetic" statistics of gross domestic product which are included in the section on Australian National Accounts.

## LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
<i>ABORIGINES</i>	
TABLE 1	1
APPROXIMATIONS OF ABORIGINAL POPULATION	
<i>NEW SOUTH WALES</i>	
TABLE A1	3
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. OFFICIAL POPULATION RETURNS—NEW SOUTH WALES (1788-1850)	
TABLE A2	5
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. STATUS —FREE—NEW SOUTH WALES	
TABLE A3	7
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. STATUS —BOND—NEW SOUTH WALES (1788-1850)	
TABLE A4	9
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. STATUS —MILITARY—NEW SOUTH WALES (1788-1850)	
TABLE A5	10
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. FREE IMMIGRATION INTO NEW SOUTH WALES 1788-1820	
TABLE A6	11
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. FREE IMMIGRATION INTO NEW SOUTH WALES 1821-1850	
TABLE A7	12
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES—NEW SOUTH WALES (1787 TO 1850)	
TABLE A8	14
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. CONVICTS FROM UNITED KINGDOM LANDED IN NEW SOUTH WALES (1788 TO 1850)	
TABLE A9	16
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. CONVICTS FROM OTHER COLONIES LANDED IN NEW SOUTH WALES AND VAN DIEMEN'S LAND	
TABLE A10	18
APPROXIMATE PROJECTED FULL-TIME WORKFORCE NEW SOUTH WALES AND VAN DIEMEN'S LAND COMBINED	
TABLE B1	19
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES GOVERNMENT FARMING AND GRAZING 1788 TO 1821	
TABLE B2	20
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES PRIVATE FARMING AND GRAZING 1788 TO 1821	
TABLE B3	22
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. TOTAL NEW SOUTH WALES FARMING AND GRAZING 1788 TO 1821	
TABLE B4	24
COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES AGRICULTURE, QUANTITY OF LAND AND PRODUCE, 1837-1851	



TABLE B5	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. APPROXIMATE SHEEP AND CATTLE NUMBERS NSW AND PORT PHILLIP 1788-1850	25
TABLE B6	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NSW PRICES PAID BY GOVERNMENT FOR WHEAT, MAIZE AND MEAT 1810-1820	26
TABLE B7	AGRICULTURE. FARM PRICES AND PRICE INDEX NEW SOUTH WALES 1818 TO 1850	27
TABLE B8	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NSW MANUFACTORIES—NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS	28
TABLE B9	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES VESSELS REGISTERED, 1837-1851	30
TABLE B10	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES EXPORTS AND IMPORTS	31
TABLE B11	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. LAND GRANTS—AGGREGATES—NEW SOUTH WALES (1789 TO 1850)	32
TABLE B12	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. CROWN LAND SALES: BY AUCTION 1832 TO 1850	34
TABLE B13	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES LAND SALES, OTHER THAN AUCTION, 1840 TO 1850	35
TABLE C1	BRITISH GOVERNMENT FOUNDATION OUTLAYS ON NEW SOUTH WALES AND VAN DIEMEN'S LAND, 1786-1822	36
TABLE C2	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. TREASURY BILLS DRAWN 1787 TO 1835	37
TABLE C3	NSW COMMISSARIAT OPERATIONS 1787-1827	39
TABLE C4	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES COMMISSARIAT EXPENDITURE 1788 TO 1835	40
TABLE C5	SUMMARY POLICE FUND NEW SOUTH WALES 1810-1821	42
TABLE C6	NSW COMMISSARIAT REVENUE	43
TABLE C7	NSW COMMISSARIAT EXPENDITURE	44
TABLE C8	NSW COLONIAL FUND REVENUE	45
TABLE C9	NSW COLONIAL FUND EXPENDITURE	46
TABLE C10	NSW CROWN LAND FUND REVENUE	47
TABLE C11	NSW LAND CROWN EXPENDITURE	48
TABLE C12	EXPENDITURES BY PUBLIC AUTHORITIES IN AND ON NSW 1822-1850	49

TABLE D1	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES MORTGAGES ON LAND, 1837-1850	50
TABLE D2	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. BANK OF NEW SOUTH WALES LIABILITIES 1817 TO 1851	51
TABLE D3	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. BANK OF AUSTRALIA LIABILITIES AND ASSETS 1827 TO 1835	52
TABLE D4	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. BANK OF NEW SOUTH WALES ASSETS 1817 TO 1851	53
TABLE D5	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. SAVINGS BANK OF NEW SOUTH WALES LOANS AND OTHER ASSETS 1832-1850	54
TABLE D6	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES SAVINGS BANK DEPOSITS 1819 TO 1831	55
TABLE D7	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. SAVINGS BANK OF NEW SOUTH WALES INTEREST RATES 1832-1851	56
TABLE D8	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. ALL BANKS—NEW SOUTH WALES LIABILITIES AND ASSETS. AVERAGE OF WEEKLY FIGURES 1836-1850	57
TABLE D9	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. NEW SOUTH WALES—BANK EXCHANGE RATES, 1835-1850	58

### *VAN DIEMEN'S LAND*

TABLE A1	TASMANIAN POPULATION 1803 TO 1850	59
TABLE A2	CONVICT ARRIVALS FROM UK, 1788-1853	60
TABLE B1	VAN DIEMEN'S LAND—GRANTS AND SALES OF CROWNLAND	62
TABLE B2	TASMANIAN AGRICULTURE STATISTICS 1811-1850	63
TABLE B3	TASMANIAN AGRICULTURE STATISTICS 1829-1850	64
TABLE B4	VAN DIEMEN'S LAND WOOL PRODUCTION AND PRICES, 1821-1849	65
TABLE B5	TASMANIAN AGRICULTURE PRICES 1806-1850	66
TABLE B6	TASMANIAN BOATS AND FISHERIES 1828-1850	68
TABLE B7	TASMANIAN ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES (NUMBER OF VESSELS) 1804-1850	69
TABLE B8	INTERNATIONAL TRANSACTIONS AND FOREIGN COMMERCE. TASMANIAN EXPORTS 1822-1850	70

TABLE B9	INTERNATIONAL TRANSACTIONS AND FOREIGN COMMERCE. TASMANIAN TOTAL IMPORT 1822-1850	71
TABLE B10	TASMANIAN WAGE RATES, SHILLINGS/DAY, 1824-1850	72
TABLE B11	NUMBER OF FACTORIES IN TASMANIA 1824-1850	73
TABLE B12	TASMANIAN LIQUOR LICENSES 1829-1850	74
TABLE B13	TASMANIAN POST OFFICE EMPLOYEES 1824-1850	75
TABLE C1	EXTRA—N.S.W. COMMISSARIAT OPERATIONS 1791-1810	76
TABLE C2	APPENDIX TABLE D VAN DIEMEN'S LAND COLONIAL FUND REVENUE 1824-1850	77
TABLE C3	APPENDIX TABLE E VAN DIEMEN'S LAND COLONIAL FUND EXPENDITURE 1824-1850	78
TABLE C4	VDL LAND FUND: REVENUE	79
TABLE C5	VAN DIEMEN'S LAND BALANCE OF PAYMENTS, 1828-1849	80
TABLE D1	FINANCIAL MARKETS AND INSTITUTIONS. TASMANIAN BANKING, ASSETS, COIN AND BULLION 1835-1850	81
TABLE D2	FINANCIAL MARKETS AND INSTITUTIONS. TASMANIAN BANKING, ASSETS, DISCOUNTS AND CASH CREDITS, 1835-1850	82
TABLE D3	FINANCIAL MARKETS AND INSTITUTIONS. TASMANIAN BANKING STATISTICS, LIABILITIES, NOTES IN CIRCULATION, 1824-1850	83
TABLE D4	FINANCIAL MARKETS AND INSTITUTIONS. TASMANIAN BANKING, LIABILITIES, DEPOSITS 1836-1850	84

### *WESTERN AUSTRALIA*

TABLE 1	ANNUAL POPULATION SERIES FOR SWAN RIVER 1829-1850	85
TABLE 2	POPULATION—MIGRATION AND NATURAL INCREASE SWAN RIVER, 1829-1850	86
TABLE 3	WESTERN AUSTRALIA, CROWN LANDS: DISPOSAL AND REVENUE, 1829-1850	87
TABLE 4	W.A. LAND SURRENDERED AND LAND ALIENATED ON A REMISSION CERTIFICATE BASIS 1837-1841: THE EFFECT OF THE 1837 GLENELG REGULATIONS	88
TABLE 5	CROWN LANDS: CONDITIONS RELATING TO RURAL LAND- HOLDINGS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA 1829-1840	89
TABLE 6	SHIPPING MOVEMENTS (ALL W.A. PORTS) 1829-1850	90

TABLE 7	ANALYSIS OF RECORDED SHIPPING REACHING FREMANTLE 1829-1850	91
TABLE 8	RECORDED NON-WHALING VESSELS REACHING FREMANTLE DIRECTLY FROM THE VARIOUS OTHER AUSTRALIAN COLONIES 1829-1850	92
TABLE 9	QUANTITY AND VALUE OF MAJOR W.A. EXPORT ITEMS 1837-1850	93
TABLE 10	TOTAL VALUE OF IMPORTS AND EXPORTS W.A. 1829-1850	94
TABLE 11	VALUE OF W.A. EXPORTS BY COMPONENTS, 1834-1850	95
TABLE 12	W.A. REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE 1832-1848	96

### *SOUTH AUSTRALIA*

TABLE 1	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF VITAL STATISTICS SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1836-1850	97
TABLE 2	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. AGRICULTURAL STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1836 TO 1850	98
TABLE 3	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. TRADE STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1836 TO 1850	99
TABLE 4	SOUTH AUSTRALIA—SHIPPING	100
TABLE 5	COLONIAL AND PRE-FEDERAL STATISTICS. FINANCES STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1836 TO 1850	101
TABLE 6	BANK OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA LIABILITIES AND ASSETS	102
TABLE 7	BANK OF AUSTRALASIA. SOUTH AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS LIABILITIES AND ASSETS	103