Searching for the truth: Faded footsteps, Tennyson, and the South Australia Connection

Tanya Lehmann
Flinders University

Abstract

Audrey, Lady Tennyson was wife of Hallam, Lord Tennyson and daughter in-law of Poet Laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In 1899 Hallam, Lord Tennyson accepted an invitation to journey to Australia to become State Governor, making Adelaide his temporary home with his wife, children and servants. Lady Tennyson's mother was quite disgruntled that her daughter was required to live so away from her in South Australia and consequently they corresponded frequently. Lady Tennyson's letters have become an invaluable account of Vice Regal life in Australia between 1898 and 1903. The time she resided in Australia can be viewed as a part of her life journey, and her descriptions of meetings with Australians from many social classes are particularly revealing, one of the most interesting of which is her meeting Harry 'Breaker' Morant. There are various newspaper accounts of Lady Tennyson's jaunts to country South Australia, and these have a notably different focus to her letters. Connecting the puzzle has involved a combination of picking up the pieces and complex sifting. During journeys into country South Australia, Lady Tennyson became aware of the lack of facilities for women during their confinement. She campaigned for social justice in South Australia, but with a particular determination to improve health services in South Australia by initiating the establishment of the Queen's Home, a maternity home for 'respectable' women which later became the Queen Victoria Hospital. Included in the letters to her mother is Lady Tennyson's prophecy that once her family left South Australia they would soon be forgotten. We can never completely resurrect a person from the shadows of history, but we are fortunate that such historic documents as her letters home provide a window into the past, frosted as it may be.