

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND:

News from Birmingham to Australia and back again

Richard Abbott

In 2011, while cataloguing a collection of maps and plans by the Birmingham surveyor Howard Simcox (1818-1888), I was looking for further biographical details. Apart from obituary notices I could find little, and, without much hope, turned to Google and entered "Howard Simcox", "surveyor" and "Birmingham" as search terms. The results included Access to Archives references to a few of his maps, and also a link to a newspaper report:

"STAFFORDSHIRE – LOST IN A COALPIT - A most extraordinary accident has been experienced by Mr. Howard Simcox, a highly respectable surveyor in Birmingham. It appears that Mr. Simcox, having missed the Bilston railway train, beguiled the time until another should start by a walk in the neighbourhood of the station. On his return in the dusk of the evening, he took what he considered to be a short cut across a piece of waste land, when, before he was aware, he found himself suddenly dropping into the mouth of a coal shaft. Fortunately, there was a chain hanging down the pit at the time. At that he clutched, and succeeded in breaking his fall; but he had not sufficient strength to raise himself up, and, getting exhausted, he was compelled to let the chain slip through his hands and go down, he knew not where, nor whether the chain he was holding might reach only half way to the bottom. As the chain ran through his hands they were lacerated in a horrible manner; some of his nails were ripped off, his legs were wounded, and his trowsers ripped into shreds. Fortunately the chain did reach to the bottom of the shaft, some thirty or forty yards beneath the surface, where he fell with a heavy shock which sprained his ankle, and for a time rendered him insensible. On recovering his consciousness he endeavoured to make himself heard by shouting and rattling the chain; but the place was lonely and unfrequented, and no aid was afforded to him. Thus Monday night passed. On Tuesday he repeated his cries, but that day passed also; and Wednesday also went drearily by in like manner. On Thursday afternoon, although greatly exhausted, he continued his cries for assistance and kept rattling the chain. Fortunately a boatman on the canal close adjoining saw the chain move, and, attracted to the spot by curiosity, shouted down the shaft. The truth was at once made apparent: a skip was let down the pit, and Mr. Simcox, in a very exhausted state, was rescued from his perilous position. For three days and nights he had remained at the bottom of the shaft without a morsel of food. There was fortunately some water at the bottom, with which he could partially quench his thirst. He never lost hope of rescue, and slept away the nights. He is now recovering."

A surprising account, but just as surprising was its source, The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 2 August, 1856, published in New South Wales, where it was attributed to the Manchester Guardian.

Although no date was given, other attributions in the same newspaper suggested early May, 1856. But where had the story come from originally? The Birmingham Journal, a newspaper similar in its political stance to the Manchester Guardian, seemed a likely candidate, and a search revealed the original report published on 19 April, 1856. The Birmingham Journal report was longer, including additional paragraphs referring to the search for the missing surveyor, who had been collecting rents in Bilston on 5 April, 1856 (it was feared that he had been robbed and murdered) and concluding with a criticism of mine owners who left abandoned pits in a dangerous condition. The phraseology used, suggests that this may have been the origin of the reports in the Manchester Guardian and subsequently in The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser and also in The Times on 21 April, 1856. Perhaps these were the words of Howard Simcox himself.

The Google search had led to the National Library of Australia newspaper database, a comprehensive indexing of Australian newspapers using optical character recognition; the transcript offered shows that this is by no means perfect and search terms do not always produce the desired result. This database has now been subsumed into the Trove site <<http://trove.nla.gov.au>> which is not searched directly by Google; however a wide range of Australian newspapers can be accessed through Trove, and a search here also produced, from The Star, Ballarat, Victoria, 11 December, 1863:

"Mr Howard Simcox has, through the agency of Messrs Wilson and Mackinnon, of Melbourne, published a second edition of 'Outward Bound; a poem containing an account, in verse, of a voyage in the 'Roxburgh Castle,' from England to Australia.' Mr Simcox, formerly a highly respectable surveyor in Birmingham, in 1856 sustained a frightfully severe accident, all but attended with loss of life, by falling down a deserted coal pit near Bilston, to a depth of two hundred feet. He managed to seize hold of a chain in his descent by clinging to which he saved himself from being precipitated at once to the bottom, but in slipping down the chain one of his legs was rendered useless, his ancles were dislocated, and the flesh and nails torn off his hands. He remained at the bottom for three days, at the end of which he managed to attract the attention of a passing boatman by shaking the chain. He was speedily hauled up, and after being confined to bed for many weeks, found himself so materially debilitated that he deemed it necessary to undertake a voyage to Australia in the hope of recruiting his health. The poem of "Outward Bound" is therefore a metrical account of his voyage in the Roxburgh Castle, in which poem he describes, in a natural manner, and sometimes not unpleasing verse, the incidents of the voyage. He panegyricizes Captain Dinsdale for his uniform kindness to the passengers and himself, and especially for his having so far honored the author as, on the right occasion, to lay a dish more on the well-served table, having heard that it was his absent brother's birthday:

A courteous speech our captain makes,
And thereto do I quick respond:
From great monotony this breaks,
To friendship adds another bond.

'Outward Bound' is a novel form of a journal of a voyage to Australia , and may in this alone find merit in the eyes of those who like to peruse experiences which most of us have undergone with little variation. We are glad to see a long and respectable list of subscribers to that little work, and trust the author may succeed in disposing of many more copies."

Howard Simcox appears to have stayed in Australia for several months, and possibly a year or more; he followed *Outward bound*: a poem containing an account in verse of a voyage in the *Roxburgh Castle* from England to Australia, together with a remarkable adventure, etc., etc., first published in 1863, and reprinted several times, with *Rustic rambles in rhyme*: collected in various parts of Victoria, first published in 1864, and reprinted in 1866. Some of the reprints may post-date his return to England .

The sources freely available through Trove, together with images from the State Library of Victoria's Victorian historic publications digitisation project www.slv.vic.gov.au/our-collections/digitised-collections have provided further insight into the life of someone previously noted in Birmingham only as a surveyor, and later as an art collector and antiquarian. In particular free access to Australian newspapers through Trove contrasts with the British Newspaper Archive developed by the British Library and Brightsolid; it is frustrating that access to the latter, unlike the earlier 19th Century British Library Newspaper database, is not available on subscription for use in local public libraries.

Richard Abbott

Birmingham Archives and Heritage