

The two fishery inspectors

managing the Victorian fishery, 1885–1894

‘The two fishery inspectors: managing the Victorian fishery, 1885–1894’, *Provenance: the Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 20, 2022. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © David Harris.

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Abstract

The ‘Outward Letter Book, Inspector of Fisheries and Game’ used between 1885 and 1894 is an unusual archival item at Public Record Office Victoria. Apart from being a rare example of a letter book from the Victorian Government’s colonial-era Department of Fisheries, it was used by only two inspectors over almost 10 years. Rather than the expected matter-of-fact administrative tone, the letters, memos and reports preserved in the Letter Book carry a clear sense of the authors as they express their opinions over a range of matters to do with the fishery. Both inspectors came from maritime backgrounds, so there is strong sense of identification with the commercial fishers with whom they regularly worked. At the same time, there is a palpable resonance with current concerns about the marine environment, species extinction and destructive fishing practices—matters that concerned both commercial fishers and the inspectors. Finally, the Letter Book captures a period of significant change in commercial fishing in the colony, as the older, pre-industrial remnants of artisanal fishing, brought to the colony by commercial fishers during the gold rush, gave way to an imagined industrial fishery with dreams of a Bass Strait trawling industry.

Introduction

Between the 1850s and early 1890s, the Victorian Parliament introduced at least seven Acts to do with fisheries.[1] The colony’s fish resources received legislative protection as did oyster beds as well as foreign fish introduced for sport into Victorian waterways. It is reasonable to assume that all this legislative and administrative activity, which included several inquiries, must have generated a significant amount of paperwork. Remarkably, all that remains of these attempts to manage and regulate the colonial fishery is one letter book: ‘Outward Letter Book, Inspector of Fisheries and Game’ (hereafter referred to as the Letter Book). [2]

AJ Harrison, a former secretary for fisheries in Tasmania and a biographer of the celebrated fishery scientist William Saville-Kent, was also puzzled by the absence of Victorian colonial fishery records at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV). He suggested the files were ‘apparently

lost’ when records from the Department of Trade and Customs were transferred to the Commonwealth at Federation.[3] This seems unlikely as the new state of Victoria retained the same administrative responsibilities for fisheries as during the colonial era. It is likely the records were destroyed as a result of the 1916 Interim Report of the Royal Commission into the Civil Service, which recommended ‘obsolete’ records could be destroyed.[4] Either way, due to an intriguing set of circumstances, PROV holds an administrative remnant of the colonial government’s attempts to manage the Victorian fishery. Harrison could not have known that the document existed when he was researching Saville-Kent because it only arrived at PROV in recent years. It had been in private hands until 2008 when it was donated to the State Library of Victoria. It was subsequently transferred to PROV.

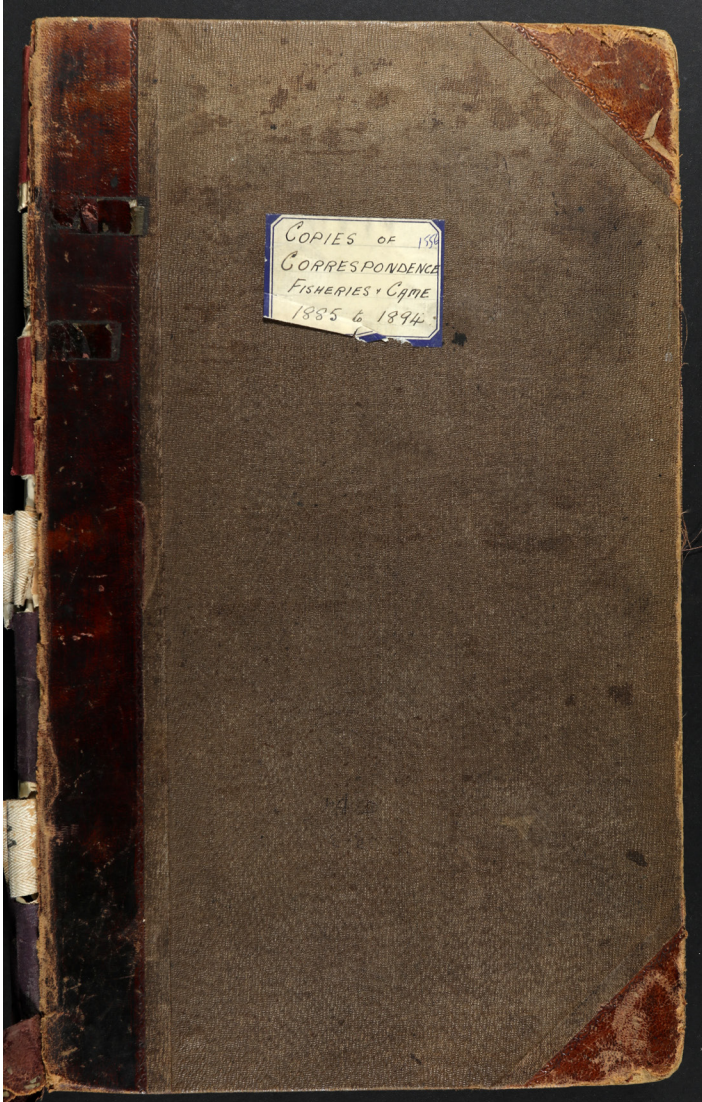


Figure 1: Cover, 'Outward Letter Book, Inspector of Fisheries and Game', 1885–1894, PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Unit 1.

A treasure trove, the Letter Book contains duplicates of reports, letters and memos written across almost a decade (1885–1894) by Captain Charles Mandeville, chief fisheries inspector from 1884 to 1887, and his successor, Captain James Anderson, who occupied the role from 1888. Comprising more than 700 pages, it documents competing interests and ideas associated with the exploitation of the colonial fishery, thereby offering rare insight into colonial ideas about the environment and the exploitation of a shared resource. Much like a diary or a collection of letters, it enables the reader to chart a trajectory of perceptions and ideas from two individuals who had similar responsibilities for fishery management. At the same time, as the Letter Book contains evidence

of the grinding wheels of the colonial bureaucracy, it also reflects a nineteenth-century concern with the environment and fishery management refracted through the perspectives of these two government officials. Although the story of the colonial fishery ended more than a century ago, in a larger sense, it is unfinished, as similar issues persist into the present. This paper explores how the 'Outward Letter Book, Inspector of Fisheries and Game' contributes to our understanding of the colonial fishery and the attempts by colonists to manage a natural resource they were exploiting.

Histories of nineteenth-century Victorian fisheries

Histories of Victoria's colonial fishery have drawn on a range of viewpoints from local and family histories to more academic approaches. The majority of published research takes the form of locally based studies, with a substantial amount of research coming from local and community historians.[5] Understandably, many of these histories concentrate on families involved in the fish trade, an approach that is also evident in several oral history projects that focus on more recent history.[6]

A small number of scholars have brought perspectives from historical and maritime archaeology, environmental history, and the history and philosophy of science to their research on aspects of the colonial fishery.[7] Museums and archives staffed by volunteers at Port Albert, Lakes Entrance, Paynesville and elsewhere have also been essential to collecting and establishing archives to protect records.

While local studies are an essential part of teasing out the details of the colonial fishery, perspectives offered by historians in the northern hemisphere provide a broader international context to trends evident in colonial fishery debates. Evidence of international connections is apparent in the Letter Book: for example, a report to the consul for Sweden and Norway on Victoria's fishery and a response to a letter from a commercial fisher at the British fishing port of Grimsby who suggested that Victorian commercial fishers could be trained by British fishers. Studies of the Pacific Northwest in North America, the French Atlantic coast and Monterey Bay in California are also relevant to the Victorian colonial fishery: racial tensions that characterised the commercial fishery in California were present in colonial Victoria, although with some local differences; competition for inshore commercial fisheries between tourist and commercial fishing interests were present on the Gippsland Lakes, as they were at Arcachon on the French Atlantic coast and at Monterey Bay; and the rise of angling as a sporting

interest among the urban middle class in the Pacific Northwest and concomitant political activity had parallels in Victoria when angling and fish acclimatisation groups asserted their own environmental priorities in the management of the colonial fishery, particularly during the 1870s and 1880s.[8]

In Victoria, a significant influence on fishery politics and commercial fishery management during the colonial period was the Victorian Acclimatisation Society (VAS). Historian Pete Minard characterises the VAS as an international scientific movement that sought to introduce non-native animals and plants to new areas. During the colonial period in Victoria, it was concerned with social and environmental reform.[9] Minard's portrait of the

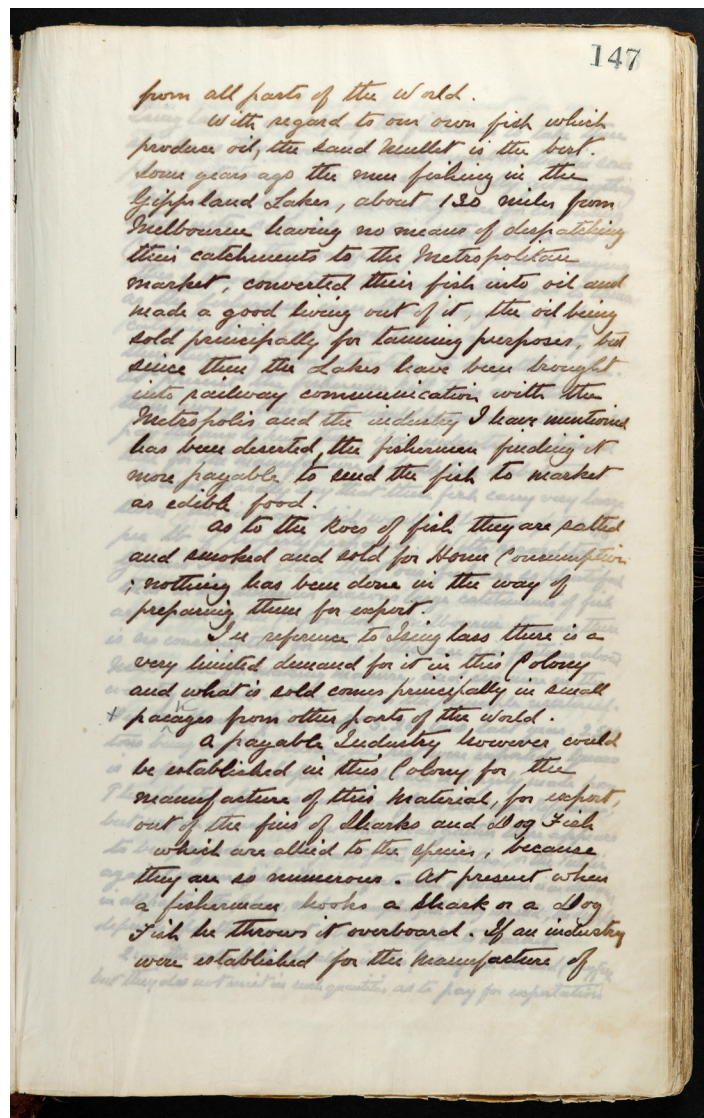


Figure 2: Extract from Charles Mandeville's report to the consul for Sweden and Norway on Victoria's fishery, 25 June 1886.[10]

acclimatisers reflects the circumstances in which they operated and establishes their contribution in the context of prevailing debates, both in the colony and overseas. The Letter Book demonstrates that the acclimatisers' environmental concerns were not unique in the colony, but were part of a much wider debate about the colonial fishery and issues related to commercial fishing.

The Letter Book

Containing more than the mundane work of administration, the Letter Book has unexpected reflections on preserving and managing the marine fishery, and other insights such as the place of fish in the colonial diet. A significant amount of correspondence in the Letter Book is from the inspectors to the commissioner for trade and customs, but there are also annual reports and other items of correspondence that were published in colonial newspapers. A letter or report could be written for a particular recipient or audience and a more general audience: for example, a letter addressed to the consul for Sweden and Norway or a fishery commissioner from New South Wales might also appear in several newspapers. Such public engagement made the inspectors participants in ongoing public debates about the uses and management of the colonial fishery.

A comparable, though very different, source to the Letter Book is another letter book and a set of pocketbooks that Angela Taylor used to write *A Forester's Log*, a study of forester John La Gerche. Taylor's history provides valuable insights for comparison of the work undertaken by government officers engaged with different types of environmental management.[11] Unlike La Gerche, whose responsibilities were confined to a specific region (Ballarat–Creswick), the fisheries inspectors, although based in Melbourne, were required to travel to distant fishing settlements along the coast and to inland regional centres. The inspectors' Letter Book, like La Gerche's letter book and pocketbooks, contains important reflections on aspects of the colonial exploitation of a natural resource. For the inspectors, the enforcement of fishery regulations relied, to a large extent, on a network of honorary and paid assistant fishery inspectors throughout the colony. Like La Gerche, they faced problems of under-resourcing that compounded the difficulties of meeting their responsibilities, and they employed different strategies to meet those demands. Mandeville, as will be discussed below, devoted considerable time and attention to problems associated with the dumping of unsold fish at the Melbourne Fish Market and to writing long, official letters about all aspects of the fishery. By contrast,

Anderson, who had the added responsibility of collecting information for the fisheries' annual reports after they were introduced in 1889, appeared to rely on his networks and personal contacts among the fishing community to keep him informed about matters requiring action.

The Letter Book is not a logbook. Therefore, it is difficult to discern the work patterns of the two inspectors. Further, as the duplicate letters are only of outward correspondence, there is little evidence of the relationship between the inspectors and their superiors, although both men were open in their criticisms of unworkable management practices. For example, Mandeville's frustration over ongoing difficulties with enforcing regulations on the Gippsland Lakes is evident in his letter to the commissioner of trade and customs in 1887:

The law with regard to the Gippsland Lakes is a farce, what do the men down there care for lines struck out on a chart in the Customs House or copies of Laws and notices pasted up with no one to see them carried out?[12]

Mandeville's solution was to close the Gippsland Lakes to netting between November, December and January. This would make it possible to regulate the transport of fish and help put a stop to wastage at the Melbourne Fish Market where, in one month, 50 tons of perch and bream, which were full of spawn, were buried at the tip because they could not be sold.[13]

Mandeville also turned his attention to what he believed was the ignorance of colonists about fish as part of their diets. He believed Victorians were predominantly a meat-eating community, with the consumption of fish being either related to religious beliefs or 'merely ... a matter of fashion', although he noted there was a market for imported preserved fish.[14] Part of the problem, in Mandeville's view, was that people did not know how to purchase fresh fish. It was also the case that customers could be deceived about the quality of fish sold by hawkers and stall holders. Colonists, he argued, were unfamiliar with buying fresh fish and 'townspeople who have small dealings in fish ... do not really know whether the fish are fit for human food'. 'The housewife', he explained, 'always looks at the gills' to check for freshness. However, while red was taken as a sign of freshness, it was easy to colour the gills with 'a little bullocks blood', and salmon, trout, pilchards and silver fish turned red when they were rotten.[15] Mandeville wanted town councils to employ fisheries inspectors, as distinct from health inspectors, to manage and inspect the sale of fish at markets.

The dumping of fish at the Melbourne Fish Market was a recurring complaint. The main cause was the lack of refrigeration; however, commercial fishers argued that fish sellers used dumping as a way of creating an artificial scarcity that was then used to inflate prices. Complaints about dumping appear throughout the Letter Book, both in terms of wasted product and economics, primarily the money commercial fishers paid on freight for fish that may be condemned. Taking just two instances from the first annual report in 1889: 65 tons of fish were condemned between December 1886 and February 1887, and 56 tons were condemned the following summer.[16] Other example of waste frequently referred to by the inspectors included the sale of underweight fish and lobsters with spawn attached. Lobsters were sold live but it was illegal to take them when they were spawning. A common practice was to strip their eggs prior to sale. Mandeville described this as a 'shameful practice' that was resulting in declining lobster numbers. Yet, it seems the practice was entrenched, for when Anderson wrote his first annual report in 1889, he mentioned that 28-dozen crayfish full of spawn had been seized at the market the previous August. While no further spawning lobsters were seized that year, Anderson believed this was only because the eggs had been removed prior to market. The only hope he saw on the horizon was that 'some of the Queenscliff fishermen favour a close season'.[17]

Although neither Mandeville nor Anderson discussed it directly, it is likely that many fishing families used older fishing methods they had brought with them to the colony during the gold rush. For example, when, following the railway, the first groups of mainly Scottish commercial fishers moved from Westernport Bay to the Gippsland Lakes in the late 1870s, they requested a telegraph line be established between Gippsland and Melbourne so they would know the demand for fish at the Melbourne Fish Market on any given day. This conservative approach was overwhelmed by the numbers of commercial fishers who entered the trade part-time or seasonally. Mandeville preferred the full-time fishing families who maintained the old ways. It was not a nostalgia for artisanal fishing; rather, it was an assumption that such fishers had a long-term investment in the health of the fishery. Following a visit to Phillip Island in 1885, Mandeville mentioned in his report how visitors to the island (by which he meant tourist anglers) had plenty of spare time to fish out the lakes. By comparison, full-time fishers, he reflected: 'Make their living entirely by fishing and therefore take more interest in the fish generally ... they are less wasteful of the fry than those in parts where fishing is only taken up occasionally'.[19]

August 28 Dogue were seized at the beach
 which were full of spawn. September 20 fish
 only in Oct. Nov. & Dec. although the
 principal part of the fish were female the
 cause to the market price of them being
 it was the opinion of the Inspector of old bank
 as well as my own that all the eggs had been
 brushed and washed out leaving not the
 slightest trace behind. In my letter of Sept 6
 I recommended a close season the fishermen
 have been too long but I still consider that
 there should be time allowed for the females
 to deposit their spawn and in support
 of that recommendation I am supported
 that some of the Inverclyde fishermen
 favor a close season

I have the honor to be
 Sir
 Your Obedient Servant
 James Anderson
 Inspector of Fisheries

Figure 3: Extract from James Anderson's report to the minister for trade and customs, 4 December 1888.[18]

Later that year, during a visit to Port Albert, Mandeville expanded on this theme of the importance of full-time commercial fishers to the productive use of the fishery. Clearly in a buoyant mood, he referred to Port Albert as the finest fishing ground in Victoria—if not all Australia—a place where flounder and whiting were so plentiful that all other fish were being thrown back in the water. He reserved his greatest praise for the fishing families he met:

the fishermen are a hard working well conducted set of men, who will I believe, bring up their children to their own calling, this being so, they take an interest in the fishing, and I am of the opinion that the majority wish to have law and regulations and wish that they be enforced. They are bringing up a fine race of people, in fact the fine physique of the young men and boys strike the visitor, they are with few exceptions excellent horsemen (?) and there are few places in the world where you could get a better brigade of 'Irregular [sic] horse'. For instance one man has thirteen children, nice sons all about six feet and one they say is six feet six ins [inches]. [20]

Mandeville's comments provide insight into the way Victorian commercial fishers were embedded in British maritime culture. His reference to 'a fine race of people' drew a connection, often made during this period, between the strength of the empire and British mariners, while the term 'irregular horse' referred to the practice the British used in India to provide support to the regular military. While the military potential of commercial fishers appears to have been largely a product of Mandeville's fertile imagination, the idea was nevertheless discussed in the colony, including a proposal that commercial fishers be formed into a special naval brigade.[21]

The exploitation of marine resources was a frequent topic on which Mandeville mused as part of his interest in the potential of the colonial fishing industry. Writing to the consul for Sweden and Norway, he mentioned, matter-of-factly, about the trade in shark fins with China and the potential to produce isinglass, a gelatine derived from fish bladders that had several uses including as part of brewing beer:

At present when a fisherman hooks a shark or a Dog Fish he throws it overboard. If an industry were established for the manufacture of isinglass, it would pay the fisherman to take these sharks as they abound in such numbers that in some places at times the men can hardly get anything else. There being no industry here for converting them into saleable material the fins are sent to China where they realize 2/6 per lb. But in saying this I should state that very little goes to China as the fishermen make their living easier by catching food fish and there is no necessity for their turning their attention to anything else.[22]

The potential for a trade in fish by-products, particularly those that were rarely discussed or considered in the colony, was attractive to Mandeville. It bothered him that Victorian colonists could not see the value in isinglass or scallops and that no-one was interested in trading in fish meal.[23] (His discussion about shark fins is notable for its omission of Chinese commercial fishers who had established a lucrative trade with Singapore and Hong Kong conducted by Chinese businesses who also exported traditionally dried fish and abalone.)[24]

The inspectors not only dealt with a wide range of topics, as demonstrated in the breadth of issues covered in the Letter Book, but also had considerable reach. As their letters and reports were often printed in colonial newspapers, they were significant participants in ongoing public debates about the exploitation of the fishery and its management.

The two inspectors in time and place

If the importance of fishery management in the colony was measured by the number of staff and resources allotted to it, then it would be difficult to find anything of less significance to the colonial government. Pete Minard has highlighted that the 1880s were a significant period when 'fisheries management matured as a science' in America and Europe.[25] But, in Victoria, fishery management stagnated. Between 1880 and the appointment of Charles Mandeville in 1884, the fisheries branch in the Department of Customs and Trade virtually ceased to exist. The position of chief inspector remained, but only for administrative purposes; in practice, honorary inspectors enforced fishery regulations. Some of these inspectors were members of local angling societies or fish acclimatisation societies; they might be the local police constable or a local magistrate or the holder of some other professional position in the community.[26] In the absence of a fishery inspector to meet with commercial fishers, the department focused on the enforcement of regulations at the expense of management. Assisting with this approach was a ready supply of anglers willing to be enforcers. The appointment of Charles Mandeville occurred at a time of considerable tension between commercial fishers and the department. To make up for years of neglect, both inspectors, once appointed, met regularly with commercial fishers. Perhaps the changes in fishery management that occurred over the period covered by the Letter Book were also a response by the colonial government to the way its practices were out of step with international trends.

The two inspectors brought different perspectives about the colonial fishery to the task of fishery management. During their tenure, both engaged frequently with the commercial fishing community. Their different perspectives and approaches to the job were a reflection of their different personalities and maritime backgrounds. Charles Mandeville, a former British naval officer, came to the position following a brief but controversial period as commandant of the Victorian Colonial Navy. Despite newspapers raising doubts about his capacity to make sound judgements or follow naval protocols, he was

appointed chief inspector of fisheries in December 1884, aged 37. In July 1887, following his sudden death, his obituary ignored the untidy details of his colonial naval career, focusing instead on his achievements as a fishery inspector, for which (and without any training) he had showed 'great aptitude in mastering both ichthyology and the details of sea fishing'.[27]



Figure 4: This engraving (top) was created from a photograph taken onboard the Cerberus, 18 February 1878. Captain Mandeville is in the centre of the three men in the front row (see detail bottom). Mandeville had been appointed commander of the Victorian Colonial Navy in 1877 and the Cerberus had been recently purchased by the Victorian Government. The original caption read: 'Our colonial defences—The Victorian ironclad "Cerberus"'. Courtesy of Friends of the Cerberus Inc.[28]

Mandeville regularly attended social functions at Government House and counted among his social connections Premier Graham Berry and FF Bailliere, a well-known Melbourne bookseller, publisher and bon vivant. Critics, of which there were many, voiced their disapproval of him in parliament and the Argus. For example, when his career in the Victorian Colonial Navy ended, there was speculation as to whether he would be appointed inspector of charities, but the Argus quipped that it would be easier to imagine him as 'an official of nothing in particular'.^[29] Certainly, his less than lustrous career in the Colonial Navy was not a recommendation; however, if his appointment as chief fishery inspector was a sinecure, it did not detract from the interest he took in, and the breadth of his reports on, the fishery.

Mandeville's successor, Captain James Anderson, also came from a maritime background. He had arrived in the colony in 1853 at the age of 19 from the east coast of Scotland where he had been raised in the fishing village of Pittenweem, Fifeshire. Pittenweem relied on the herring trade in the North Sea. Other leading commercial fishing families in the colony, such as the Mentiplays, emigrated from the same village; another fishing family, the Carstairs, came from an adjacent village, Cellardyke. Working first as a boatman transporting goods up the Yarra River, Anderson later crewed on several government vessels until he was appointed master of the government steamer,

Lady Loch.^[30] He became the chief fishery inspector in June 1888, a year after Mandeville died.

Mandeville's death, the Argus suggested, presented an opportunity for 'some radical changes'.^[32] While the changes Anderson introduced were hardly radical, his approach to fishery management was more grounded in the daily practicalities of the commercial fish trade. Anderson's workload increased to include the writing of annual reports containing an array of statistical measures, and he also undertook intercolonial visits and hosted visiting fishery experts. Such new responsibilities for the chief fishery inspector may have been designed to give the impression that Victoria's fishery was ready to meet the new era that Federation would bring.

Sections of Anderson's annual reports appeared in the daily press, but none appear to have been tabled in parliament. Each year statistics were collected and collated about the number of commercial fishers at each town or fishing station, the value of the equipment used, the fish species caught, the number of baskets sent to market, the economic turnover at different fish markets and the prosecutions for breaches of fishery regulations. Details of the number of baskets of fish sold at the Melbourne Fish Market were available in the daily newspapers, but there was no accounting of individual species or numbers of individual fish per basket.



Figure 5: Expedition Group with Captain Anderson, some of the crew of government steamer Lady Loch, islanders and two dogs at King Island 1887. Full photograph (left) and detail with the captain in the middle (right). Taken during a Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria expedition to King Island. Source: Museums Victoria: <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1250709>.^[31]

The 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition, held during Anderson's first year as chief inspector, boasted an aquarium featuring numerous elements of the Victorian fishing industry: fish hatcheries, fishing boats, fishing nets, live fish and displays of fish models created by William Saville-Kent. Anderson's work and the fishery display at the exhibition was considered proof of the social progress being made in the meeting of science and commerce; yet, in reality, little scientific advancement had been made in understanding the colonial fishery.

Colonial fishery science had not contributed much to understanding about native fish species, being mainly confined to identifying where local fish species belonged in the wider context of European scientific identification and the naming of species, and promotion of the artificial propagation of oysters and fish. The most qualified in the area of fisheries was Professor Frederick McCoy, a man described by Brian Saunders as 'essentially a museum worker [who] appeared not to recognise the importance of field work, other than specimen collection, in zoology'.^[33] In 1892, four years after the Centennial Exhibition, Anderson admitted in evidence to a government fishery inquiry that he knew nothing about the habits of fish in the colonial fishery, adding that neither did anyone else.^[34] His certainty about this level of ignorance was not misplaced. In 1919, a royal commission into Victoria's fisheries reported on the lamentable absence of knowledge about the marine life in the ocean off the Victorian coast:

So little is known of the habits of any of our fishes that no one can say authoritatively what effect the operations of the fishermen are having upon the shoals, or that present methods are not a menace to the very existence of the species.^[35]

In the intricate web and warp that held commercial fishing community together, disputes and rivalries were endemic, and science had little relevance. Rather than tensions over scientific perspectives about the fishery, most disputes arose from matters concerning access to the different parts of the fishery or conflicts over royalties. Anderson's friendship with those families he had known in Scotland often drew him into disputes. Among the broader fishing community, he was criticised for relying too much on the advice of 'friends and relatives'. Certainly, in circumstances in which politics rather than science had the greater influence over the management of the fishery, the established families were not likely to squander the chance of exercising political influence. Connections were very important. Commercial fishers such as William Carstairs had a long history of lobbying colonial politicians, appearing at government fishery inquiries and being present when politicians visited the Gippsland Lakes. Carstairs was active in efforts to undermine a regulation

banning commercial fishing on Lake Tyers (where fishing had been reserved for Aboriginal fishers and visiting tourists since 1878), a move that had the support of the local magistrate court as well as Anderson. Repeatedly breaking the law demonstrated that it was impossible to enforce, resulting in repeal of the ban in 1888. Anderson reported that 'the opening of Lake Tyers for netting has given general satisfaction all over the district'.^[36] While the reality was more complex, Anderson's seemingly innocuous comment belied his personal support for those involved.

Personal networks established by the older generation of fishers began to be less effective as the size of the fishery expanded and attention turned to the establishment of a trawl fishery in Bass Strait. The colonial fishery was not yet industrial, but, recognising that it was heading in that direction, some commercial fishers combined into unions to protect their interests. At Port Albert, the South Gippsland Fishermen's Union was one of several unions formed to represent the interests of commercial fishers; others were established on the Gippsland Lakes and at Portland. Initially taking their lead from the emerging labour movement, they affiliated with the Trades Hall Council until the contradiction became apparent that some commercial fishers were business owners and some were workers, leading to the creation of fishery associations.

To the new generation of unionised commercial fishers, Anderson appeared to have the ear of fishing families who were of 'the same old school of conservatives [who] believe and act as their forefathers did'.^[37] The older generation of fishers such as William Carstairs opposed unionisation—a change that marked the beginning of the end of his type of political and familial influence, and of the management of the fishery by one chief inspector and a legion of honorary assistant inspectors. As the size of the fishery grew, and as it became clear that established political connections served only the interest of a few, Anderson began to appear out of step with the changes taking place in the different fishing communities.

Anderson and the visiting experts

By the late 1880s, with the prospect of Victoria becoming a state in the new Australian Commonwealth, effective exploitation and regulation of the colony's fishery had become a matter of 'national importance'. The Victorian Government, seeking to reform the small, poorly funded fisheries department that sat within the customs department, looked to New South Wales and Tasmania for inspiration. Anderson's annual reports provide clear indication of the fishery's changing direction during this time.

In 1887 and 1888, the Victorian Government employed two fishery experts, William Saville-Kent and Sir Thomas Brady, to advise on the fishery. Both produced reports that received a typical colonial response—overwhelming disinterest in the opinions of visiting experts. If nothing else, their influence can be seen in Anderson's extra workload. Saville-Kent's and Brady's visits did not go smoothly, as politics, personalities and social networks were never far from anything to do with the colonial fishery.

Saville-Kent's career as superintendent of Tasmanian fisheries had ended abruptly and acrimoniously in mid-1887 when the Tasmanian Government refused to renew his contract.[38] He subsequently approached each of the colonial governments for support in establishing an artificial oyster industry, and he approached the conservative Victorian upper house for an invitation to report on the colony's fishery. In the latter, he found support from Dr Frank Dobson, an enthusiastic member of the Victorian Acclimatisation Society, the Linnean Society and the Field Naturalists Society.[39] Individual politicians and some lobby groups, such as the VAS and the Fish Protection Society, which had been calling for a royal commission into the fishery, supported Saville-Kent's appointment, several politicians identifying oyster farming as one of the potential benefits that could arise from his report.[40] The Victorian Government employed him on a two-month contract to advise on oyster cultivation and to write a report on Victoria's fishery, but the results were probably of greater benefit to Saville-Kent's career than they were to the Victorian fishery.

By the time Saville-Kent was concluding his survey of the Victorian fishery in 1888, Sir Thomas Brady, an inspector of Irish fisheries, had arrived in Tasmania. Coincidentally, as was often the way with British imperial professional networks, Brady had been involved with Saville-Kent's original employment as the Tasmanian fisheries superintendent and had come to supervise the breeding of 600,000 salmon ova he had brought with him.[41] His duties in Tasmania completed, Brady visited Victoria where, with the ink barely dry on Saville-Kent's report, he was invited to provide his perspective on the Victorian fishery. Victorian politician LL Smith, who represented the Mornington electorate in the Legislative Assembly, a constituency containing many commercial fishing families, had recommended Brady be invited to report on the fishery after Saville-Kent's visit. Smith possibly saw a political opportunity, as many commercial fishers had been angry about the way Saville-Kent had conducted himself during his visits to fisheries around the colony. Perhaps Smith also knew of the tension between Brady, an 'old-school' fishery manager, and Saville-Kent, the

model of a young, ambitious, modern fishery scientist.[42]

Anderson's reports on Saville-Kent's work were unflattering, which was only to be expected. Saville-Kent foolishly claimed to have mediated in a dispute between commercial fishers on the Gippsland Lakes, although locally it was believed he had involved himself in a matter that was none of his business. As several of the commercial fishers were among those who regularly advised Anderson, Anderson took pleasure in reporting on the 'complete failure' of Saville-Kent's artificial oyster beds at Corner Inlet.[43] Nor did Anderson take kindly to Brady's report: he advised the collector of customs that he did not think 'the fishermen of the Colony who bring up their sons to follow their calling would care to avail themselves of any scientific knowledge respecting the fishing industry' from Sir Thomas.[44] Yet Brady made some recommendations that appealed to Anderson. For example, commenting on the longstanding debate regarding the size of mesh used in commercial fishing nets, Brady observed that 'to interfere too much with the fishing industry is decidedly objectionable', earning Anderson's praise.[45]

Anderson's overall dismissal of Saville-Kent's and Brady's reports was, perhaps, short-sighted, as the colonial government was looking to the future. It had identified the need to address major problems as they arose rather than allowing them to accumulate to the point where public outcry forced the calling of a select committee of inquiry or a royal commission. Anderson's new yearly reports contained a wealth of information. For example, the 1890 annual report, which contained data collected during 1889, identified the quantity and value of fish and crayfish delivered to the Melbourne and Ballarat fish markets. Evidence that changes were underway can be seen in the monthly reckoning, for the first time, of the numbers of baskets condemned as unfit for consumption, the numbers of baskets with underweight fish and the total weight of baskets delivered. Interestingly, the 1890 report also included information about the time of year when it was believed commercial fish species spawned and a listing of the legal weight of saleable fish. Anderson's reports on a series of unsuccessful trawling trials in Bass Strait was a further indicator of the new direction the government wanted the fishery to take.

The invitations to Saville-Kent and Brady to report on the colonial fishery were an expression of mounting urgency and the need for reform of fishery management and regulation, which, as in previous years, ultimately led to a fishery inquiry. The politics associated with the appointment of the visiting experts reflected longstanding divisions over the colonial fishery that had been seething since at least the late

1860s and with greater intensity throughout the 1880s.

Conclusion

The Letter Book reveals how the colonial fishery was perceived by those responsible for managing it. While neither of the inspectors had a scientific understanding of the fishery, they were participants in vibrant debates—for example, over the unsustainable exploitation of crayfish and the wasteful practices at the Melbourne Fish Market, where tons of unsold fish were dumped—during a period of significant change as the effective management of the fishery for commercial exploitation became a matter of urgency. The Letter Book also reveals the curious value to the colony of established commercial fishing families whose practices of restraint stood in contrast to the problems of excess caused by novice or seasonal commercial fishers.

The Letter Book is also a record of the steps taken towards the creation of an industrial fishery at a time when some families still practised older styles of commercial fishing; it thus records a way of life confronted with new thinking and new realities of earning a living as a fisher in the twentieth century. How and why nineteenth-century environmental debates and enthusiasm for the fishery as something worth protecting were silenced as Victoria became part of the Federation and exploitation of the fishery gathered momentum remains a mystery.

Beyond these aspects of management and economic change is the rich tapestry that is colonial engagement with marine and freshwater environments. The colonisers brought a diversity of understandings and theories to explain the colonial fishery landscape. Commercial fishers, fishery bureaucrats, honorary fishery inspectors, Chinese immigrant fishers, politicians, fish acclimatisers, scientists, visiting fishery experts, anglers, fish auctioneers, fish hawkers, fishing companies, consumers and many others understood the waterways of the colony differently and responded to it accordingly. The Letter Book provides significant insights into these myriad, rich, colonial imaginings.

Endnotes

- [1] Act for the Protection of Fisheries of Victoria 1859; Act for the Regulation of the Oyster Fisheries in Victoria 1859; Act for the Preservation of Fish in the Lakes and Rivers of the Colony of Victoria 1859; Fisheries and Game Statute 1864; Fisheries Act 1873; The Fisheries Act Amendment Act 1878; Fisheries Act 1890.
- [2] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Outward Letter Book, Inspector of Fisheries and Game, Unit 1, 1885–1894. This is one of the rare archival records related to the Victorian colonial fishery.
- [3] AJ Harrison, *Savant of the Australian seas: William Saville-Kent (1845–1908)*, Australian Historical Association, Hobart, 1997, fn 33, 429.
- [4] Thank you to Charlie Farrugia, Senior Collection Advisor at Public Record Office Victoria, for clarifying what might have happened to the fishery records; see also EW Russell, *A matter of record: a history of Public Record Office Victoria*, Public Record Office Victoria, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 28–30.
- [5] There are several well-researched local histories on Victorian colonial fisheries such as chapters in Peter Synan, *Highways of water: how shipping on the lakes shaped Gippsland*, Landmark Press, Drouin, 1989; Bruce Bennett, *The fish markets of Melbourne*, Bruce Bennett, Hawthorn, 2002; Bruce Bennett, *The Hastings fishermen: and the history of fishing at Hastings on Western Port*, Bruce Bennett, Hawthorn, 2004; Joy Seevers, *Where pelicans are: a story of tragedy and tranquility*, Black Fin Books, Lakes Entrance, 2004; Stanley Joseph Evans, *Fins, scales, and sails: the history of fishing at Port Fairy 1845 to 1945*, Jim Crow Press, Daylesford, 2003; Allan Meirs, *Fisher folk of Fishermans Bend*, Port Melbourne Historical and Preservation Society, Melbourne, 2006; Neil Everitt, *They fished in wooden boats: a history of Port Franklin and the fishing families*, ECG Copy Centre, Warragul, 2011.
- [6] Garry J Kerr, *Craft and craftsmen of Australian fishing, 1870–1970: an illustrated oral history*, Mains'l Books, Portland, 1985; Timothy Lee and Jill Ellis, *Casting the net: an oral history project of the Lakes Entrance Family History Resource Centre*, The Centre, Lakes Entrance, 2002; *End of An Era, About the fishermen*, available at <<https://gippslandfishermen.wixsite.com/endofanera/gallery>>, accessed 2 December 2022; Tanya King and Dayne O'Meara, "The people have spoken": how cultural narratives politically trumped the best available science (BAS) in managing the Port Phillip Bay fishery in Australia', *Maritime Studies*, vol. 18, 2019, pp. 17–19. Deakin University, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-018-0097-5>; Jodi Frawley, "Dancing to the billabong's tune": oral history in the environmental histories of Murray–Darling Basin rivers', in K Holmes and H Goodall (eds.), *Telling environmental histories*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2017, pp. 51–79.
- [7] An unsurpassed study on an aspect of the colonial fish trade is Alister Bowen, *Archaeology of the Chinese fishing industry in colonial Victoria*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2012. See also Anna Clark, *The catch: the story of fishing in Australia*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2017; Pete Minard, *All things harmless, useful and ornamental*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2019; David Harris, 'Chinese fishing at Metung', *Paynesville Maritime Museum Journal*, vol. 7, July 2018, pp. 20–25; David Harris, 'A slow catastrophe? Fishing for sport and commerce in colonial Victoria', in Nancy Cushing and Jodi Frawley (eds.), *Animals count: how population size matters in animal–human relations*, Routledge Environmental Humanities, New York, 2018.
- [8] See, for example, TD Smith, *Scaling fisheries: the science of measuring the effects of fishing, 1855–1955*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994; JE Taylor, *Making salmon: an environmental history of the northwest fisheries crisis*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1999. Two excellent histories with relevance to the current political battles in Victoria over commercial fishing, tourism and sport fishing are CY Chiang, *Shaping the shoreline: fisheries and tourism on the Monterey Coast*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2008; A Garner, *A shifting shore: locals, outsiders, and the transformation of a French fishing town, 1823–2000*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2005.
- [9] Minard, *All things harmless*.
- [10] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Mandeville to the Consul for Sweden and Norway, 29 June 1886, p. 147.
- [11] Angela Taylor, *A forester's log: the story of John La Gerche and the Ballarat–Creswick State Forest, 1882–1897*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998.
- [12] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Report to the Commissioner for Trade and Customs, 14 April 1887.

- [13] Ibid.
- [14] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Mandeville to the Consul for Sweden and Norway, 29 June 1886.
- [15] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Report to the Secretary of Trade and Customs, 9 July 1886. Mandeville had previously reported this on 16 March 1885.
- [16] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Annual Report January 1889.
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001, p. 280.
- [19] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Mandeville to the Secretary for Trade and Customs, 23 May 1885.
- [20] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001, 9 November 1885.
- [21] Victorian Parliamentary Debates (VPD), 1887, vol. LVI, p. 1801.
- [22] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001. pp. 147–148.
- [23] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Mandeville to the Consul for Sweden and Norway, 29 June 1886, pp. 148–149, 153.
- [24] See Bowen, *Archaeology of the Chinese fishing*.
- [25] Minard, *All things harmless*, p. 127
- [26] Harris, 'A slow catastrophe?'
- [27] 'Death of Captain Mandeville', *Age*, 4 July 1887, p. 5.
- [28] Original image from: *The Graphic*, 13 April 1878, p. 372, available at <https://www.cerberus.com.au/cerberus_1878.html>, accessed 29 November 2022.
- [29] 'Captain Mandeville', *Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette*, 21 September 1883, p. 4.
- [30] 'The late Captain Anderson', *Williamstown Chronicle*, 8 October 1910, p. 3.
- [31] Original image available at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-147417638/view>, accessed 29 November 2022.
- [32] *Argus*, 15 July 1887, column 2, p. 5.
- [33] Brian Saunders, *Discovery of Australia's fishes, a history of Australian ichthyology to 1930*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, 2012, pp. 152–155. Also see Minard, *All things harmless*, for a discussion of McCoy.
- [34] Victorian Parliamentary Papers (VPP), 1892–93, vol. 1, 'Final report from the Select Committee upon the Fishing Industry of Victoria, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendices', Captain James Anderson, 22 July 1892, Q 1172–3.
- [35] VPP, 1919, vol. 2, 'Report of the Royal Commission on Victorian Fisheries and Fisheries Industries', p. 6.
- [36] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001 Report to the Minister for Trade and Customs, 20 August 1889, p. 345.
- [37] Chairman, Gippsland Lakes Fisherman's Union, 'The fishing industry', *Argus*, 22 July 1889, p. 9.
- [38] 'Tasmanian intelligence', *Tasmanian*, 28 May 1887 p. 25; 'Tasmania', *Argus*, 2 July 1887, p. 5.
- [39] VPD, 1887, vol. LVI, p.1803. Dobson was also related to Tasmanian politician Alfred Dobson who was Speaker of the Tasmanian Parliament at the time Saville-Kent was employed there. Elizabeth Barrow, 'Dobson, Frank Stanley (1835–1895)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, available at <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dobson-frank-stanley-3418/text5175>>, published first in hardcopy 1972, accessed online 28 February 2020.
- [40] VPD, 1887, vol. LVI. pp. 1802–1803. Much has been written about Saville-Kent, his work and his personality. His visit to Victoria seems less successful than others have suggested. See Minard, *All things harmless*; Harrison, *Savant of the Australian seas*; Iain McCalman, *The reef: A passionate history*, Viking Press, Melbourne, 2013.
- [41] LEX, 'The superintendent and the inspector of fisheries', *Mercury*, 30 July 1887, p. 4; VPD, vol. LVII, 1888, p. 95.
- [42] Harrison, *Savant of the Australian seas*, p. 426.
- [43] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001, 'Annual Report of the Inspector of Fisheries of Victoria for 1889', p. 379.
- [44] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001, 18 September 1888, p. 258.
- [45] PROV, VPRS 16182/P0001, 11 September 1888, p. 252.