This essay explores *A Letter from Sydney*, an unusual and important text that articulated an influential new template for colonization within the British Empire. Its arguments laid the foundation for the establishment of South Australia; underwrote the establishment of “systematic” schemes for the settlement and governance of Otago, Canterbury, Nelson, Wellington, and Taranaki in New Zealand; and were significant in policies and debates relating to the colonization of Canada in the 1830s and 1840s. This text—which was highly mobile within the various forms of print (newspapers, pamphlets, periodicals, and reforming tracts) that were central to a burgeoning imperial commons—mobilized opinion in favor of colonization as a solution to Britain’s demographic and political problems and encouraged Britons to see geographic mobility within the empire as a way to escape constrained social mobility at home.

Written by Edward Gibbon Wakefield while he was incarcerated in Newgate prison, *A Letter* was published anonymously as a book in 1829. This publication strategy allowed Wakefield to publicize his ideas while avoiding any moral controversies arising from his own stained reputation after the scandal and sensational trial that had led to his imprisonment for
abducting a young woman. Wakefield’s authorial sleight of hand also had the effect of encouraging many contemporary readers to believe that this work was the “genuine” product of a colonial writing at the distant edge of the empire. The conditions around the Letter’s production posed long-term difficulties for Wakefield, who was desperate to reestablish his “name”: how to position himself as a serious commentator on “social problems,” a political economist, and an architect of empire was a persistent conundrum that haunted him.

In addition to locating A Letter’s theory of colonization within several intellectual traditions, this essay recovers the production, circulation, and reception of what has long been recognized as a foundational text for British settler colonialism. In exploring A Letter’s textual history and its long afterlife in the imperial commons, here I develop an approach to intellectual history that is sensitive to the significance of different media, their quality, and the cultural work they carry out. It is underpinned by a desire to measure and understand what Peter Mandler has identified as the “relative throw” of texts—the social geography of their intellectual and political influence.1 Thinking about the transformative power of texts requires us, I argue, not only to be attentive to language and how a text’s arguments relate to both contemporary discourses and earlier texts but also to pay close attention to material form, the history of its production, dissemination, and reception, and its afterlife in subsequent debates and exchanges: we should strive for a more balanced appreciation of text and object.

In the specific case of Wakefield’s Letter, it would be a mistake to try and measure the “throw” of this text simply as a “book”—the first edition of A Letter from Sydney published anonymously in 1829 with Robert Gouger as the “editor.” Such a strategy would be misguided, not only because that work did not immediately establish Wakefield as the author of this new theory but also because the book was not the only print culture artifact or public articulation of Wakefield’s theory of colonization. To trace the “throw” of these arguments, we need to reconstruct the development of an argumentative complex, made up of the initial newspaper articles that presented “A Letter from Sydney” to the public, its publication as a book and its subsequent life through newspaper and periodical commentaries and reviews, and its reworking in pamphlets, promotional literature, and Wakefield’s later commentaries on empire and the practice of colonization. Taken together, these printed texts, as well as the verbal articulations of the Letter’s theory in evidence before parliamentary commissions, in speeches
to potential emigrants, and the cut and thrust of both metropolitan and colonial debate, produced a kind of sedimented complex of social diagnosis and political argument. This essay attempts to trace how this complex took shape, the traditions it grew out of and reworked, its movement through the political domain, and its mobility across an extended imperial sphere of political conversation and argument. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the pathways of production, dissemination, and reuse were such that Darnton’s communication circuit—which imagined a sequence of author-publisher-printers-shippers-booksellers-readers structuring the operation of print culture—seems an uneasy fit for polymorphous outputs of a man like Wakefield and for the avalanche of words, spoken and written, that constituted the energetic and extended public sphere of the British Empire.

Manuscript

“A Letter from Sydney” was produced under unusual circumstances: like Gakaara’s Mĩhĩrĩga ya Agĩkũyũ, discussed by Derek Peterson, it was written in prison (see chapter 10). But where Gakaara was extolling moral reform within the context of decolonization, Wakefield’s imprisonment encouraged him to see the empire as the solution to Britain’s pressing social problems.

After the death of his first wife in 1820, the moderately successful career Wakefield fashioned came to an abrupt halt in 1826, when an elaborate plan to secure his political future misfired badly. He abducted Ellen Turner, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a rich manufacturer and county sheriff. Wakefield, who had never met Ellen, believed that marrying her would secure her father’s support and enable him to launch a successful career in parliamentary politics. After deceiving Ellen, Wakefield married her at Gretna Green and then fled with his new wife to France, where agents of her family staged a rescue in Calais. The case became a public sensation. Wakefield was sentenced to three years in prison in May 1827, and the marriage was annulled though a special act of Parliament.

Wakefield’s incarceration at Newgate was a trying, humbling, and at times terrifying experience. Because Newgate prisoners were able to purchase a range of resources, Wakefield largely escaped the prison’s infamous conditions: he paid rent to secure a room to himself, retained a servant, and was supplied with books and newspapers by his family. Nevertheless, he was curious about the prison’s operation, his fellow inmates, and especially the experiences of those sentenced to death. His experiences and
the interviews he conducted with fellow prisoners underpinned his *Facts Relating to the Punishment of Death in the Metropolis* (1831) and invested the evidence he gave the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments in 1831 with particular authority.

Imprisonment encouraged Wakefield to think about a set of problems he came to see as interrelated: population and emigration, poverty and crime, Britain’s development and the status of its colonies. In addition to writing about the penal system, he also began to produce a series of reflections on the connections between colonial and metropolitan development. He did this through a series of fictional letters from a colonist in New South Wales: he had no firsthand knowledge of Australia but nevertheless saw that colony as a squandered opportunity for Britain.

The text he crafted in Newgate suggested that the colony had developed slowly because land policies had distorted the labor supply: the practice of making land grants, often of large tracts by British standards, made it possible for men to quickly become landowners rather than having to work to accumulate capital. Wakefield argued that colonial land needed to be sold, rather than granted. Land should be fed onto the market in such a way that settlement was restricted and concentrated, rather than dispersed: through this mechanism the government had the power to “civilise” the colonists by bringing them into regular contact, interdependence, and mutuality. Most important, the cost of the land had to be fixed at a level that would prevent workers from becoming landowners too quickly: this price, which he would later term the “sufficient price,” would produce an equitable balance between the interests of capital and labor. Through a tax on rent, it would be possible to fund the further emigration of laborers from Britain, relieving population pressure at home: ideally, these new colonists would be young, and there would be an equitable ratio between men and women. Such measures were necessary because the lack of order in colonial economic and social life meant that cultural decline became characteristic of life in the new society: haplessly following their sheep across their large farms, colonists would swiftly become “a Tartar people.” This would not just mean that British civilization would founder in the colonies; it would also make the colonists ungovernable by Britain, as they would be “uncouth, and ignorant, and violent as the great mass of North Americans.” Ultimately this would sever the bonds of empire: “our grand-children will assert their independence,” and they “will govern, or rather, misgovern themselves.”
Thus the vision for colonial development that Wakefield developed in Newgate was not driven by a desire to create self-sufficient offshoots of Britain but reflected a wish to use these territories to solve British problems: to relieve the pressure of population that constrained opportunity, to create new fields for British capital, and to generate new markets for British goods. Under this system, the colonies “would no longer be new societies” but “so many extensions of an old society.” Although he suggested that colonial life already offered greater happiness and opportunity than life in the metropole, properly ordered colonies would bring greater benefits, as they could help blunt “Want,” the terrible desire for food, land, and security that blighted British life.

He decided that this text should be published anonymously. Even before his trial, Wakefield was deeply concerned with his reputation: before his capture by Ellen Turner’s family, he worked furiously, preparing a text titled “Statement of Facts” in an attempt to defend his conduct, which was published in John Bull. That text, which was initially published anonymously, was designed to counter the salacious narratives that were circulating through sensational public prints, cheaply printed texts that carried the latest news and rumors to wide audiences. This strategy failed. Newspaper editorials and reportage dismissed Wakefield as “malignant” and “infamous”; the Times condemned Wakefield as a “callous-hearted wretch,” suggesting that “Nature does not often produce such a monster.”

Morning Chronicle

Between 21 August and 8 October 1829, the Morning Chronicle published Wakefield’s letter in nine installments. No author was credited. When the first letter was published on 21 August, it was prefaced with this editorial comment: “We are enabled to publish some valuable Correspondence respecting Australia. The following letter, which contains many interesting details, will be followed by others.” Below this prefatory editorial gloss, the text of the first letter was set more closely and in a smaller font. The letter plunged the reader into what seemed like an exchange of letters, beginning: “I will not pretend to answer all the questions of your letter; but will endeavour to give you, in general terms, my opinion of this country, and of the prospects it affords to Emigrants.” This text offered readers a description of life in New South Wales that effectively critiqued imperial governance and
the character of colonial society as well as reflecting on the development of empires in world history.

Historians have relied on the book version of *A Letter* and as a result have failed to recognize that *Morning Chronicle* readers encountered the serialized “Letter” alongside another anonymous Wakefield text. On 27 August, under the heading “Sketch of a Proposal for Colonizing Australasia,” the *Chronicle* informed its readers: “We have frequently alluded to a pamphlet, under the above title, containing views on the subject of colonization, of great importance to the interests of the country. . . . We have received permission from the author to print it in our columns.”

As its title suggested, this was a schematic outline of a plan for colonization: it was programmatic, clear, concise, even clipped in tone, in stark contrast to the more descriptive, digressive, and discursive tone of the “Letter.”

At least one reader drew a connection between the texts. On 2 November 1829, the *Chronicle* featured a long letter from a certain “CC,” who suggested that the “author of the Sketch” and the “writer of the series of Letters” were “both probably the same person.” The letter outlined the theories developed in both texts and offered some refinements of this model of colonization. This letter writer may well have been Wakefield as well. Not only does this letter have a strongly Wakefieldian tone, but a crucial piece of internal evidence suggests that it was him. This letter forcefully made an argument about Canada that Wakefield would make in his later work. This argument suggested that controlling the land price would be an ineffective instrument for directing the colonization of Canada, where a large and open border with the United States allowed colonists to move there to take up large land grants. On 3 November, “DD” responded with another letter to the editor, offering further criticisms, both of CC’s letter and of the original scheme: the speed of this exchange, the very composed and argumentative sensibility of the letters, and their tone might suggest that “DD” was also Wakefield, who was intent on keeping his scheme and its ideas before the public. If Wakefield was indeed the author of one or both of these letters, they not only display his investment in publicizing his arguments through the press but also initiated his almost constant reworking of his key arguments.

Wakefield’s “Letter,” his “Sketch,” and the subsequent exchanges were part of the *Morning Chronicle*’s treatment of social problems and its uncompromising critiques of the established order. The *Chronicle* was an ideal venue for Wakefield’s criticisms of British life and his questioning of the
orthodoxies of political economy. John Black, who was closely connected to Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, was the editor of the Chronicle. John Stuart Mill suggested that Black was the “first journalist who carried criticism & the spirit of reform into the details of English institutions.” The Chronicle played an important role in cementing the press as a political force, and its editorial commentary and detailed reportage were important in constituting the “social problems”—such as pauperism, vagrancy, overpopulation, and the limited franchise—that came to be a recurrent feature of Victorian public life. Charles Dickens wrote for the Chronicle from 1834, and it would later provide a forum for the articles by Henry Mayhew that were collected as London Labour and the London Poor (1861). Wakefield’s 1829 texts were an important contribution to reformist writing; but his arguments were unusual in their identification of the reorganization of colonial economies and a new systematized form of colonization as cures for Britain’s social ills.

Textual (and Familial) Relations

Wakefield’s writings can be read against those of his contemporaries and within the context of debates over population, poor relief, and empire in the 1820s and 1830s. But the form of “A Letter,” its sensibility and arguments, really only make sense when read against the much older traditions of writing that shaped it: imaginary voyages, diagnostic political economy, and Scottish Enlightenment discussions of social development. Much of Wakefield’s reading, like that of most educated Britons (as William St Clair has reminded us), was drawn not from the newest or most fashionable works, even if he was an avid reader of the press; rather, he drew heavily on layers of older texts in a variety of editions and formats. Unlike many of his peers, however, Wakefield’s connections to some of these textual traditions were familial as well as intellectual.

Key here was his grandmother Priscilla Wakefield, who effectively functioned as his primary parent for much of his youth. An influential Quaker social reformer, she also became a prolific author. Her seventeen books blended moral didacticism with large amounts of information. They were designed as instruments for teaching as well as leisure, which she believed should be dedicated to improvement, rational recreation, and wholesome pleasures of the family. In her three-volume Mental Improvement, or, The Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art (1794–1797), for example, a family
with children aged between nine and sixteen spend their evenings in pleasant and instructive conversations with their parents.

Most of her work harnessed the conventions of travel writing for educative purposes. Although Priscilla traveled little, her reading and imagination enabled her to produce a sequence of travel narratives, most of which followed family groups on journeys within the United Kingdom, Europe, America, and Asia. In her work, the empire was less a realm over which Britain providentially exercised its military might or economic power than a space within which Britain and British individuals could exercise positive and benign moral influence, redeeming the nation.14 These works contained significant criticisms of British society and colonial development. In her *Excursions in North America*, Priscilla Wakefield suggested that New World societies had regressed because of the dispersal of migrants and the resulting erosion of civilization. Among the American colonists, she suggested, were many who wanted to “retire to the uncultivated parts of the country, and obtain a grant of a certain portion of land.” After building basic dwellings, beginning rudimentary cultivation, and seeking food through hunting, they “quit the spot on which they have bestowed some labour, before it is completely clean, and remove further into the forest, where they can live unrestrained by law or good manners.” These qualities meant that these Europeans “are a kind of savages, hostile to the Indians, and to their more civilized countrymen, who succeed them.”15 These arguments anticipated many of the arguments that her grandson would make three decades later about the dangers of large land grants and the importance of “concentration” to the cultivation of “civilization” in the colonies.

Priscilla Wakefield herself also engaged with traditions of political economy. Her important if unpopular *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798) criticized Adam Smith’s support for the dismantling of apprenticeship regulations. She highlighted the implications of his vision of the organization of work, which locked women into unskilled work without any training. She believed that Smith’s theories impinged on the liberties of women.16 While her grandson exhibited much less concern with the particularities of women’s financial opportunities, he embarked on editing a serial edition of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, complete with commentary. Smith’s arguments were an important touchstone for Wakefield, especially his concern with civilization and his insistence on regulating the cost of land.17

Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s enthusiasm for the political economy tradition was probably also shaped by the work of his father, Edward Wakefield,
who was a friend of Henry Brougham, Francis Place, and James Mill. He was best known as the author of *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political*, a work undertaken at the suggestion of John Foster, First Baron Oriel, formerly chancellor of the Irish exchequer. *An Account* offered a Malthusian reading of Ireland’s development. It was deeply concerned with quantification, a preoccupation that undercut the usefulness of the “wild Irishman” as an analytical framework and demonstrated that Ireland was amenable to being “read” through the lens of political economy.\(^{18}\) He was well respected for his understanding of economics, being called to give evidence to parliamentary committees on sugar imports (1808), bullion (1810), and agricultural depression (1821). He was also an influential land agent and an advocate for educational reform and the improvement of lunatic asylums. In the 1830s and 1840s he championed his son’s theories, writing numerous letters to newspapers and using his political connections to lobby for the colonization cause.\(^{19}\)

Just as Wakefield’s father had been deeply concerned with the pressures of population in Ireland and his work was studded with references to Malthus, *A Letter* can be read as initiating an argument about population that rejected the claims of Malthus, who saw plans for emigration as at best a “slight palliative” for the pressures of population and who saw emigration as plagued with “dangers, difficulties, and hardships” that were not conducive to building civilized society.\(^{20}\) Despite Malthus’s skepticism of the power of migration to resolve Britain’s population pressures, Gouger and other associates of Wakefield tried to press-gang Malthus into supporting their visions of colonization. After the provisional committee of the National Colonization Society was established in March 1830, Gouger, the Society’s secretary, held meetings with Malthus, in which Malthus articulated his reservations about colonization and the Society’s plans. He was subsequently surprised, therefore, to discover that the Society had represented him as a “decided approver” of its scheme. In August Malthus underlined his skepticism of the scheme again in a letter to Sir Robert Wilmot-Horton, the former under-secretary for war and the colonies, who had earlier championed the idea of assisting British pauper families to resettle in Upper Canada, reaffirming his misgivings about the plan to produce “artificial concentration” and his broader doubts about the value of colonies as a solution to population pressure.\(^{21}\) This is an important reminder of the extent to which Wakefield’s advocacy of colonization was pushing against powerful established ideas about demography, economics, and politics.

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Wakefield’s *Morning Chronicle* articles were anthologized in a single volume in 1829. This book was not a straight reprint of the newspaper letters; not only was the *Chronicle*’s editorial gloss, which had helped initially frame “A Letter,” removed, but also this volume offered readers a preface (drawn from a *Quarterly Review* essay) and an introduction. The introduction provided some basic geographical discussion of the Australian colonies for eight pages before the material drawn from the *Chronicle* began. This somewhat blunted the effect of reading a real letter that had been central to the version published in the *Chronicle*, as the colonist’s first letter became subsumed into the introductory text, and there was no textual apparatus explaining who wrote the introduction: the “colonist” or the text’s editor.22

Most important, *A Letter* did not appear under Wakefield’s name. Gouger agreed to act as a fictional editor of the volume as well as seeing it through the press. Gouger, who felt his prospects were constrained in Britain, had planned to emigrate to the Swan River settlement to serve as manager for Thomas Macqueen, but when he met Wakefield at Newgate he had been dissuaded from this course of action. Caught up in Wakefield’s vision, he circulated the pamphlet version of Wakefield’s *Sketch* and put his name to the book version of Wakefield’s *Letter*. This was published in London as *A Letter from Sydney: The Principal Town of Australasia: Together with the Outline of a System of Colonization* by Joseph Cross, Simpkin and Marshall, and Effingham Wilson, in 1829. It sold for 6 shillings, whereas a reader could have purchased the nine issues of the *Chronicle* in which Wakefield’s original text appeared for 4s. 8d.: the book’s cost meant it was unlikely to be purchased by the poor, but it was within the means of the “middling types” to whom Wakefield’s theory was addressed. Gouger, unfortunately, carried the printing costs of *A Letter*, and when he was unable to discharge this debt he too ended up in prison.23 Gouger’s debt would suggest that *A Letter* did not sell well immediately; but there is some slight evidence to suggest that a second edition may have been published.24

Of course having the work “edited” by Gouger worked within an established conceit. A range of novels had used the device of a fictional editor: Scott, in particular, was fond of this device, and Carlyle later used it in his *Sartor Resartus* (1836), and in 1836–1837 the *Pickwick Papers* emerged under the editorship of “Boz.” Charlotte Macdonald explores some of the conse-
quences of this authorial strategy in her discussion of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which was “edited” by Currer Bell when it appeared in 1847 (chapter 2, this volume). While this strategy allowed Wakefield to float his new vision of the role of colonization in the public sphere, avoiding a clear declaration of his authorship caused him difficulties in the long term. Key figures in his circle knew that he was the author of these texts, and some influential officials knew too. For example, Gouger explained to the Colonial Office’s T. F. Elliot in 1831 that Wakefield was the author of the *Letter from Sydney*: “you must remember to have heard of him in connection with the abduction of Miss Turner some years since.” But this knowledge remained quite restricted, and the authorship of *A Letter* remained unclear for some later historians until the 1960s.

**Newspapers and Pamphlets**

*A Letter from Sydney* was never an entirely self-contained book: its life as a commodity and a set of ideas was dependent on a broader apparatus of print and political culture. Its first appearance was made plausible by the imperial information flows that meant that readers of the *Chronicle* and other newspapers were accustomed not just to reading reportage from the colonies and editorial commentary on the politics of empire but also to regularly encountering extracts from letters from colonists.

From the outset, of course, *A Letter’s* existence and value was advertised. Here newspapers were crucial, and the *Chronicle* took the lead. But advertisements appeared in a range of other newspapers as well, both as stand-alone insertions and as part of the holdings of booksellers. Newspapers could help to ensure Wakefield’s connection to readers in unexpected ways, too. In 1837 an unfortunate reader advertised in the *Hereford Times* informing locals that he had lost his copy of *A Letter*, along with the first volume of his collected works of Edmund Burke, “about 20 numbers” of Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy*, and assorted other serious works.

*A Letter* also entered the public sphere through a print culture where books were constantly recycled: their arguments were reviewed, excerpted, discussed, and alluded to, and as objects they were deployed for a bewildering array of ends. Increasingly, it was newspapers that were central in establishing the significance of particular titles: they were pivotal in making authors’ reputations, shaping the sales profile of works and propelling

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certain volumes to the status of bestsellers or “sensations.” Wakefield’s *Letter* was not a bestseller; but its arguments became entangled within the increasingly diverse cultural apparatus of print in the 1830s and threaded through a series of debates on population, politics, and empire. Not all of these were conveyed through print: Robert Gouger himself became a vigorous exponent of the colonization of South Australia on Wakefieldian lines, using letter writing, verbal argument, and printed texts to push forward many of the principles first set out in the letters and sketch that made up the 1829 book. Wakefield worked with his brother Daniel on drafting a bill that would create South Australia as a “British province” and enable the colonization of the region by British emigrants. Alongside Gouger, Wakefield was at the forefront of the campaign that led to the successful passing of the resulting bill by Parliament in 1834, and his writings provided rich material for the advocates of the project. This provided him with another opportunity to restate his theories, producing a colonization manual despite his lack of firsthand experience of Australia: that volume, *The New British Province of South Australia*, was quite successful, quickly running through two editions.

This venture indicates one domain of activity that continued to disseminate and publicize Wakefield’s ideas in the 1830s: the political agitation for the creation of new colonies. Here Wakefieldian arguments entered the public sphere through a variety of vectors: some emanating directly from Wakefield himself, others through his associates and those who forwarded his vision through various colonization companies. Perhaps because of the evidence furnished by his father to parliamentary select committees, Wakefield recognized the importance of these forums in framing “social problems.” He understood that they presented opportunities to exercise direct influence over key decision makers in the legislative process, and that they were constituted as political events by the flurries of pamphlet and press coverage that frequently accompanied their inquiries. In 1836 Wakefield provided evidence before a committee of the House of Commons on land disposal within the empire. He was a persuasive witness, and the committee recommended that the underlying principles of his scheme be enshrined in legislation and then widely applied to the empire. He gave evidence on further occasions; most influentially, perhaps, to the select committee assembled in 1840 to investigate the “New Zealand crisis.” This was a crisis Wakefield had played a pivotal role in creating: his New Zealand Company
had dispatched its first cohort of colonists in advance of Lieutenant Governor Hobson, who was sent by Lord Normanby, secretary of state for the colonies, in August 1839 to direct any formal British intervention. Wakefield was the first to give evidence to this committee and spoke for two and a half days and then was recalled at the end of the hearings and spoke across further two days, while the other nine witnesses gave evidence across less than three days. The report of the committee was strongly imprinted by Wakefield, as it directed Parliament’s attention away from the question of de jure sovereignty that was to have been the focus of its inquiries, arguing that “large numbers” of “British emigrants” were in New Zealand. Therefore, it suggested, “sovereign rights over the whole of the islands will shortly be ceded by the natives to the Queen,” and accordingly recommended that the legal foundations of colonization were sound. Not surprisingly, one of the key mechanisms this report recommended to guide future colonial development was the sale of the land at a uniform and sufficient price.

Newspapers also remained central to the dissemination of Wakefield’s work in the 1830s. If it was the Morning Chronicle that first published his “Letter,” over the next decade or so it was primarily through the Spectator that his ideas were championed. In April 1830, while Wakefield was still incarcerated, the Spectator published his essay “Cure and Prevention of Pauperism, by Means of Systematic Colonisation,” which elaborated the theories set out in A Letter from Sydney but focused more narrowly on the question of pauperism, which stood at the heart of moral, economic, and political debate within Britain.

Under the editorship of the radical Robert Rintoul, the Spectator became a consistent advocate for reform, and its supplements directed particular attention to issues relating to war and its costs, the finances of the government, and the operation of the empire. Rintoul’s investment in critiquing the establishment provided an ideal platform for Wakefield, and Wakefield emerged as the paper’s most important and influential writer. Rintoul himself was convinced, through discussion with Thomas Chalmers, that Adam Smith was mistaken in not valuing the colonies as “a profitable field for investment, labour and accumulated capital.” This perhaps helps explain Rintoul’s willingness to found and edit from 1838 the Colonial Gazette, which functioned as an important mouthpiece for Wakefield and his supporters, enabling Wakefield to make the case for colonizing New Zealand and to criticize the administration of Canada.
It is clear, then, that A Letter was influential because it was the first iteration of a set of ideas that were carried to a wide range of publics through speeches, parliamentary evidence and debate, and pamphlets and the press. Wakefield’s writings on Newgate and the death penalty established him as an important commentator on “social problems” and helped rehabilitate his name.37

Yet the extended commentary on migration, colonization, and the state of England offered in his sprawling two-volume England and America (1833) once again appeared anonymously. It drew on his work on pauperism and punishment—the powerful second chapter was entitled “Misery of the Bulk of the People.” But it also addressed the pressures confronting the middling types in the third chapter, “Uneasiness of the Middle Class,” speaking for and to the community he saw as central to the effective development of colonies in the future. Perhaps he preferred anonymity because he was firmly entangled in the lobbying for the foundation of a colony in South Australia; whatever his motivation, it certainly allowed him to launch staunch attacks on those such as Malthus who were skeptical of colonization as well as to extend the case for the creation of new colonies.38

For Wakefield’s texts on colonization in the 1830s, the anonymity of A Letter could be useful. Without Wakefield’s name attached to it, it functioned as a text that could referred to, footnoted, and listed in bibliographies: a significant text that was seen to independently confirm the broader arguments he was making. England and America’s discussion of the National Colonization Society, in which Wakefield was a prime mover, included A Letter from Sydney in the list of materials that made the case for colonization.39 England and America also footnoted A Letter as an authoritative text.40 In a similar vein, readers of Wakefield’s anonymous pamphlet Plan of a Company to Be Established for the Purpose of Founding a Colony in South Australia (1832) were also directed to Letter from Sydney.41 A later work, written with some assistance from John Ward but again published with no author’s name appended, The British Colonization of New Zealand (1837), also drew on A Letter in making a case for the application of Wakefield’s theory as a framework for the operation of the procolonization New Zealand Association.42

Wakefield’s final substantial work, A View of the Art of Colonization (1849), offered a further articulation of “systematic colonization,” but not in the dispassionate and methodical way in which some, like John Stuart Mill, had hoped he would.43 Mill wrote to Wakefield in 1848 stating that
he was “glad to hear” of Wakefield’s project, as he had “long regretted that there does not exist a systematic treatise . . . from your hand and with your name, in which the whole subject of colonization is treated. . . . At present people have to pick up your doctrines both theoretical and practical.” But A View was not an ordered treatise of thoughtful analysis, in the mode of political economy. It was a baggy, slightly shapeless work, built around a familiar device: letters. In this case, it was a book supposedly produced out of the exchange of letters and arguments between “Colonist” and “Statesman,” an exchange “edited” by Wakefield. This dialogue format was mobilized as an effective didactic tool in later works such as Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj. Yet the title page of A View also offered the acknowledgment that Wakefield was “one of the writers.” While this epistolary dialogue may have reflected a desire to make political economy and debates on the nature of colonization accessible and easily comprehensible, it more immediately allowed Wakefield to launch a series of attacks on old adversaries, such as Lord Grey and James Stephen. But this strategy backfired: where a summative and scholarly work may have established a lasting reputation among the political economists, A View once again displayed Wakefield’s passion for political brawling. It did not display the temper or careful measure that were the defining qualities of a Victorian “public man.”

The arguments Wakefield first developed in his Letter also had an afterlife through ongoing debates between political economists. Although John Stuart Mill was critical of Wakefield’s belief that his theories marked a clear break with the tradition of political economy, he was a firm supporter of Wakefield’s core vision of “systematic colonization.” But perhaps the most significant treatment of Wakefield’s work came from Karl Marx. While David Harvey’s commentary on Marx’s Capital suggests that Wakefield “hardly rates amongst the greatest political economists of all times,” he also recognizes that Marx considered Wakefield’s work of “great import because it amounted to a devastating rebuttal of Adam Smith.” Marx suggested that Wakefield’s understanding of the importance of labor relations in shaping the pattern of colonial development was crucial because it “discovered that capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things.” Equally important, Wakefield’s theory, Marx suggested, offered “not something new about the colonies, but, in the colonies, [it identified] the truth about capitalist relations in the mother country.” Marx paraphrased Wakefield’s argument (primarily drawing on England and America), suggesting that if capitalism was to flourish in the
colonies of settlement, governments would have to “set an artificial price on the virgin soil, a price independent of the law of supply and demand, a price that compels the immigrant to work a long time for wages before he can earn enough money to buy land and turn himself into an independent farmer.” Marx used this line of thought to critique Smith’s theory of primitive accumulation. Harvey suggests that Wakefield’s argument also underwrote Marx’s reformulation of the Hegelian dialectical model of capitalist economic development and Marx’s conclusion that colonization simply extended and re-created the internal contradictions of the capitalist order on a global stage.

Moving Words

Wakefield’s concern with his metropolitan standing led him to underestimate the impact of his work. But he was looking in the wrong place, as the value he placed on British political and intellectual luminaries led him to discount the significance of the work in shaping colonial development. His arguments contributed to the Colonial Office’s decision to curtail the making of free land grants in New South Wales in 1831. And, as noted, they were central in plans for the colonization of South Australia. They also provided templates for the establishment of colonies in New Zealand. Wakefield had a hand in the schemes for the colonization of Wellington, Taranaki, and Nelson. And his later reworked vision, which accorded more prominence to religion as a safeguard of colonial civilization, also underpinned the foundation of the Otago and Canterbury settlements. Wakefield was also influential in Canada. His theories provided an important template for the Hudson Bay Company, he worked as an unofficial advisor to Lord Durham (who investigated the Canadian colonies from June to October 1838), and he acted as an agent for the North American Colonial Association of Ireland and remained entangled in Canadian politics until 1844.

Wakefield’s schemes turned out to be awkward and ineffectual templates for building functioning colonies, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the significance of his work for this reason. In most cases, it quickly became clear that the controlling the price of land could not control the pattern of colonial development as easily as the Wakefield writing in Newgate believed. Nor did his vision for an ordered system of migration live up to its promises. Although a significant number of Britons did migrate, Wakefieldian schemes were much less of a safety valve than migration to the United
States, and in the settler colonies his model of a carefully balanced mix of colonists, in terms of gender and class, was rarely the reality.

Historians of the colonies have been consistently critical of Wakefield, not only because of character, but because his schemes never delivered what they promised. But they have not been sensitive to the way he shifted the British lexicon for discussing empire. Some concepts that were central to his thought, such as “civilization” and “improvement,” were, in Carol Gluck’s term, “big words.” They embraced large, frequently abstract, and polyvalent concepts, and they were made by many texts and arguments over a long time frame. Wakefield’s work did not substantially recode the freight of these terms within Britain; but his theories certainly inflected understandings of these concepts in New Zealand and Australia, especially South Australia. These were “moving words” and tracked across the globe. They fed into debates over policy and practice connected to land and migration in France, Brazil, and the United States. This suggests that it would be an interesting project to track the global motion and localization of Wakefieldian ideas; that would be an especially valuable project, given that most recent work on British imperial political thought focuses narrowly on the attitudes of a small handful of English liberal thinkers, primarily concerned with India, in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Writing the history of ideas in their contexts beyond Britain, western Europe, and the United States remains a challenge.

But Wakefield’s arguments—in their various iterations—primarily moved within Britain and its empire; through its newspapers and periodicals, through its book markets, through the pages of emigration prospectuses and guides to colonists, through the pages of periodicals and newspapers, and through spoken argument, in Parliament, in public meetings, on the hustings, and in lecture halls. These words settled most heavily in South Australia and in New Zealand: in those spaces Wakefield’s arguments were a key feature of the imperial commons. As his arguments were woven into debate and policy, they generated a new and quite durable lexicon for debating the structure of the economy and the role of the state. Even if his embrace of anonymity as a strategy created difficulties, we have seen that influential contemporaries recognized Wakefield as an important voice in British debates over social problems. But in the metropole, his words jostled with and pushed against the weight of established languages and more authoritative voices. His arguments did not move metropolitan opinion easily. Conversely, in the colonies, especially those established on “systematic”
lines, his ideas about “concentration,” “waste lands,” and the “sufficient price” took root and formed a foundational element of the political lexicon. They formed an integral part of public debate and were a key strand of what I have called elsewhere a “folk political economy,” which welded together biblical teaching, popularized understandings of the rights of powerful nations and civilizations (following Vattel), the primacy of labor and improvement in establishing property rights (after Locke), and Wakefield’s stress on the centrality of land policy in shaping society.

Wakefield’s influence in these locations was in part a result of his prominence in the very creation of these colonial settlements. But it also reflected the uneven transplantation of inherited political idioms and ideas to the colonies and the reality that Wakefield was much more preoccupied with the potential of emigration and these “extensions” of Britain than any other significant British thinker in the 1830s and 1840s. The arguments and ideas he first fashioned in Newgate resonated for decades in the settler colonies, reminding us of the ways the constant recycling and repackaging that was central to the imperial commons continued to reanimate old ideas and texts.

In part because his ideas never went away, he remains an awkward ancestral figure, not simply because of his early crimes but also because his vision was so deeply implicated in the economic, demographic, and geographic marginalization of indigenous communities. His words remade the empire—perhaps not as he hoped, but in potent and abiding ways nonetheless.

NOTES

4. Examiner, 20 August 1826, 540.
5. London Standard, 22 May 1827, 1; Lancaster Gazette, 26 May 1827, 3; Times, 7 June 1827, 1.
6. Temple and the Australian Dictionary of Biography mistakenly suggest that the final letter was published on August 6. Temple, Conscience, 134.
7. Morning Chronicle, August 21, 1829, 2.
8. Temple overlooks this version of the “Sketch.” Temple, Conscience, 134.


27. E.g., Bradford Observer, 23 May 1839, 4; Aberdeen Journal, 8 April 1829, 2; Hereford Journal, March 1829, 2; Sherborne Mercury, 20 July 1829, 3; Derby Mercury, 25 March 1829, 2; Newcastle Courant, 28 March 1829, 2; Hampshire Telegraph, 30 March 1829, 4; Leeds Mercury, 4 April 1829, 2; Leeds Intelligencer, 16 April 1829, 4.


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32. Report from the Select Committee on the Disposal of Lands in the British Colonies; Together with the minutes of evidence, and appendix (1836) (512).

33. Report from the Select Committee on New Zealand; Together with the minutes of evidence taken before them, and an appendix, and index (1840) (582), vi.

34. Spectator, 1 May 1858, 464.


38. England and America, 1:78.


41. [Edward Gibbon Wakefield], *Plan of a Company to be Established for the Purpose of Founding a Colony in Southern Australia* (London: Ridgway and Sons, 1832), 65.


54. Tsing gestures toward the ways in which language and religion shape the movement of words. “Words in Motion,” 13.
