

German Lutherans and the 'English': culture, conflict and building a one-room school in the Wimmera 1873-1881

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The paper is an edited version of a paper delivered to the 'Country Schooling: Old Stories, New Lessons' Conference at the University of Iowa, USA, 27-29 June 2002. It explores tensions between German and English settlers in establishing a one-room school in Murtoa, a hamlet in Victoria's Wimmera district, between 1873-1881. The narrative reveals some broader themes of the period relating to the establishment of a state-based 'Free, Compulsory and Secular' education system, the challenges associated with building schools in remote rural areas, and the related hardships faced by teachers.

Introduction

Australia, like the United States, is a settler society. After 40 000 years of Aboriginal inhabitation, Europeans permanently settled Australia from 1788 (Reynolds, 1999), initially as a vast jail and later as a land of unlimited economic opportunity. Its reputation as a dumping ground for convicts was in part caused by the outcomes of the American War of Independence. Following defeat, Great Britain sought new sites for ridding itself of the flotsam and jetsam of its industrial revolution. Australia, because of its remoteness, its potential for self-sustenance and its strategic location for protecting Britain's 'Far East' interests, quickly became the preferred site (Hughes, 1987).

For its first six decades, the new Australian colonies prospered and 'rode on the sheep's back' through the munificence of cheap convict labour. However, from the mid-nineteenth century a liberal shift in public opinion, both in the Antipodes and the 'Mother Country', forced the phasing out of convicts as a workforce. Other schemes, usually partnerships between employers and government, were established to keep the supply of labour constant. They were generally based on the payment of bounties to secure forms of indentured or contract labour (Clark, 1973). The schemes were pitched at Great Britain and attracted modest numbers, though the successful applicants were often found wanting in both skills and temperament, referred to in one contemporary newspaper as 'unwashed graduates of the university of rags' (*The Argus*, 24 April 1848).

South Australia, a colony that had little use for convicts, established a scheme that looked for labour beyond Great Britain but within the European comfort zone. George Fife Angas, philanthropist, entrepreneur and Chairman of the London-based South Australian Company, implemented the Wakefield Scheme in the hills of Adelaide, perhaps naively, as a collective of small farms to meet the

colony's agricultural needs. The scheme teetered on disaster because of the harshness of the new land and the unsuitability of the scheme's participants. A solution appeared, however, when Angas travelled to Europe and recruited a group of German Lutherans wrestling with their religious convictions to disobey the Prussian state following King Friedrich Wilhelm III's merger of the Lutheran Church with the Calvinist Reformed Church. These 'Old Lutherans', as they were later called, saw self-imposed exile as a solution to their dilemma. Following their arrival in South Australia the Germans quickly established a reputation for hard work, loyalty and the provision of much-needed skills in areas such as wheat-farming, viticulture and sheep-shearing (Sutherland, 1898, pp. 113-126; Brauer, 1956; Whitehead, 2001). While the Wakefield Scheme ultimately foundered, it inadvertently introduced to the Australian colonies a form of incipient multiculturalism (Madgwick, 1969).

The arrival of the South Australian Germans established a chain-reaction felt across all Germanic states. Letters to relatives and friends waxed lyrically about the opportunities in their new home: 'Come to South Australia where you will enjoy the freedom still denied you in Prussia. There is any amount of good land still available. If you come, you will rejoice when you see the conditions prevailing in this wondrous land...Come to this free land and share God's blessing with us' (Brauer, 1956, p.61).

The flood of good news attracted new batches of German immigrants, not only to South Australia, but also to the Port Phillip District of New South Wales, from 1851 the new colony of Victoria. The latter German arrivals, from Saxony, Silesia, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg and sponsored by Melbourne businessman William Westgarth, were escaping economic hardship and the political turmoil of revolution rather than religious persecution. Once settled they formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Victoria (ELCV), a more moderate form of the church than their 'Old Lutheran' brothers and sisters (Bauer, 1956; Vondra, 1981, pp. 23-46). The promise the migrants held for their new land, however, was equal to the excitement generated in South Australia:

This is an interesting time in Emigration matters. The arrival...has shown the success of a novel attempt to introduce a very useful class to our community...furnishing us with the first instalment of a species of immigration pregnant with more than usual interest or advantage...They will teach us many arts of which we are ignorant, and by their quiet industry and good conduct they will gain here, as they have gained in South Australia, the esteem and friendship of their fellow colonist (*The Argus*, 13 February 1849).

Interestingly, the reports of the Germans' arrival in Melbourne clearly distinguished them from the English-speaking majority, in spite of traditional British class antagonisms, endemic tensions between Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English settlers, and the broader distinction of either Catholic or Protestant religious affiliation. The Germans' language, their 'peculiar' rack wagons loaded with the tools of unfamiliar trades, and 'women and girls in picturesque German national costume' (*The Argus*, 13 February 1849), contributed to their separation from the assumptions and values of hegemonic British settlement, in spite of equally diverse origins. Over time these distinctions were reduced to the simple shorthand of living either as 'German' or 'English'.

This paper revisits some of the author's previous biographical research (Rushbrook, 1979; Rushbrook, 1984) and explores tensions between German and English settlers in establishing a one-room school in Murtoa, a hamlet in the Wimmera district of Victoria, Australia, between 1873-1881. The narrative reveals some broader themes of the period relating to the establishment of a state-based 'Free, Compulsory and Secular' education system, the challenges associated with building schools in remote areas, and the related hardships faced by teachers.

Settling Murtoa and establishing a school

South Australian Germans first settled the Murtoa area in 1871. A vanguard of farmers from Mount Gambier travelled in covered wagons across the dry and dusty Wimmera plain in search of land suitable for growing wheat and fattening sheep. The group consisted of Gustav and Friedrich Degenhardt, Martin Uhe and Paul Anders (Rabl, 1994, pp. 10-12). The site they selected surrounded one of the few sources of permanent water in the district. It was known as 'Lake Marma'.

The Germans rush to settle the Wimmera was prompted by Victoria's 'Pegging Act' of 1869. Unlike the South Australia they contemplated leaving, the settlers could obtain land cheaply on a lease basis, with the possibility after seven years of freehold ownership of up to 320 acres for any person over eighteen years of age, given appropriate improvements. The land Act had as its onus 'selection before survey': potential leasees placed cairns of stone, or pegs around the areas they wanted to develop and then made formal application to one of a number of land boards. By 1874 the Victorian Lands Department had made available seventeen million acres for selection purposes (Blake, 1979, pp. 33-47).

In March 1872, after a brief absence, the survey party returned to Lake Marma with their families and those of Hermann Vollprecht and Theodore Hoff. Their wagons and some crudely erected tents were

used as accommodation until modest but comfortable 'wattle and daub' houses were constructed using local eucalyptus, rammed earth and the lake's abundant 'bulloak' reeds (*Dunmunkle Standard*, 30 October 1925).

Life was difficult in these early months. The nearest town for supplies was Horsham, twenty-miles away. The nature of Wimmera soil made the ill-defined tracks dusty in summer and quagmires in winter. It was not uncommon for flooding to cut the settlement off for weeks at a time. The local wealthy 'squatter', Samuel Wilson, near whose huge leased property of 'Longerenong' the Germans had settled, also made them feel unwelcome, rigidly checking that his new neighbours did not cross his property's boundaries. However, as a local historian remarked, the new settlers 'were determined to form a new settlement and with inborn tenacity nothing deterred them in their early struggle for existence' (Rabl, 1994, pp. 11-13).

The Germans' pragmatic values of thrift, hard work and communal effort combined to make their new home prosper. Within eighteen months they had ploughed, hand-sown and harvested several excellent wheat crops. Further families arrived from South Australia, adding to the burgeoning population. By mid-1873 the community was in a position of relative economic security and its members turned their thoughts to the education of their young.

Marma Gully's first school was opened in the home of Gustav Degenhardt. It was privately run using community funds. Gustav recruited an elderly German named Meyer from the nearby Mount Pleasant goldfields to work as its teacher. Meyer was unqualified and enjoyed a reputation for finding solace in strong liquor (Degenhardt, 1980). Assistance was not initially sought from the government for fear of interference in religious matters, a legacy of faith and the Prussian state (Price, 1945, pp. 10-11). Most likely its curriculum was modelled on that of similar schools in the colony where, a visitor observed: 'virtue appears paramount above all else, it is the beginning and ending of their education, everything must bend to that' (Brauer, 1956, p. 75; Meyer, 1995). Pervading this approach was the teacher's obligation to maintain an awareness of the German community and its values, or *Deutschum* (Price, 1945, chs. 1-2). Though education was highly valued by the German community, it is unlikely Meyer was able to deliver anything of lasting value.

In spite of reservations about state interference in matters of religious education, the community fully intended to acquire a state-funded school. This may have been due to the recent arrival of members of the more liberal ELCV. At the time, however, the Education Department, established in 1872, was wary of erecting schools in areas where the permanency of settlement was in question (Blake, 1973).

Two or three bad harvests or a severe drought could force settlers off their land and scarce resources put into schools would be wasted. This was anathema to a budget conscious government (*RMPI*, 1875-1876, Holland's report).

It was for this reason that the Department rejected Marma Gully's first application for a state-school. On hearing the decision, the Germans took matters into their own hands. According to Paul Anders: 'We applied for a school for our children, but the government was so long-winded that we had a busy bee and erected one ourselves...the building was used as a school, for churches and for all kinds of meetings' (*Dunmunkle Standard*, 30 October, 1925).

The 'pug' building, similar in construction to the existing houses, measured 36 feet long and 16 feet wide. It had the added luxury of plastered walls and a board floor. School equipment was limited, consisting of '3 boards, 12 feet long, which, being loosely placed on trestles, are very shaky and easily upset' (75/15933, no. 138, VPRS 795). A section of the building was petitioned for Meyer's sleeping quarters (Rabl, 1994, p. 11).

The school was built on the edge of Gustav Degenhardt's property. A short time after construction, forty acres of his land and a further twenty acres belonging to a neighbour were acquired by the Lands Department as a site for a gazetted town. Walter Maddern, the District Surveyor, listed the town as 'Murtoa', a word in the local aboriginal language meaning 'home of the lizard' (Hammerton, 1997, p. 12).



Murtoa School 1875

At about this time a number of English selectors and townspeople moved into the area. James Seery, Michael Tobin and James Delahunty were Irish Catholics. They had tried their luck on the Victorian goldfields, an El Dorado for fossickers during the 1850s rush but now the province of large mining companies, and settled on wheat-farming as a means to make their golden fortunes. The Anglo-Australians W. H. Breen, J. B. Miller and Thomas Jellett, and Scot Robert Sheehan, were similarly motivated (Hammerton, 1997).

The new settlers were forced to select land located a good distance from the lake. This made the cartage of the precious liquid to their properties both difficult and necessary as their homes lacked iron rooves to collect any rainfall in tanks, a luxury they could not yet afford. This hardship may have led to envy or even resentment of their geographically privileged neighbours.

The English would also have found it difficult to understand the Germans' religion, customs and lifestyle. They saw them work as one building their church and school, practise their religion in a strange tongue, and allocate work tasks that challenged the traditional English sexual division of labour—German women, for example, were excellent shearers of sheep and harvesters of wheat. To some, the German way of life would have been conceived as excessively clannish and frugal, and lacking the excesses of Gaelic catharsis or British individualism. And doubt may have been cast about the Germans' loyalty to the British Empire as England had sided with France in the recent Franco-Prussian War. A consequence of this lack of understanding was the emergence of a schism between the groups. The issue of education acted as a catalyst for its acrimonious release.

In November 1873 James Holland, Education Department inspector for the Horsham District, visited Murtoa with the intention of examining first hand the community's persistent requests for a state-funded school. Although a town site was planned he knew from experience that capital outlay for a building was a risky undertaking. He was, however, quite prepared to adopt the lesser course of making use of an established building and staffing it with a government paid teacher. The only suitable building was the German school (73/33588, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

The Germans readily acceded to Holland's proposal. They offered the school to the Department on rent-free basis until a new building was approved. The offer, however, was conditional on Meyer's appointment as the government teacher. The Germans considered the request reasonable as they formed the majority of the population and had built the school using private funds on private land (73/33588, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

The English were totally against the plan. They considered Meyer incompetent to teach their children. Breen, Sheehan, Miller and Jellett wrote a bitter letter of complaint to the Department detailing their reasons. They felt at sixty-three he was too old to teach as 'it must lessen his ability...it being necessary that a Master should possess all his natural faculties unimpaired'. They criticised his 'strong foreign accent', fearing that their children might 'partake of the same imperfect way of speaking'. They also claimed that his 'reputation is not good' for on several occasions, while drunk, he had been 'guilty of very improper conduct'. In addition, they accused him of stealing a registered letter while acting as postmaster at Longerenong for 'the purpose of indulgen [*Sic.*] in more strong drink'. In concluding, they felt that 'it is essentially necessary that a teacher should possess a good moral character before he should be entrusted with so responsible an office' (73/32398, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

Holland handled the situation with skill but met with little success. At a meeting in December 1873 both groups agreed in writing to his proposal that the German school be let to the Department at a nominal rent and that Meyer be appointed subject to his passing a Departmental entrance exam in Horsham. He reasoned that if 'he did so the objections of the English would be met and whether he passed or failed the Germans were to let the Department have the building'. But contrary to his belief in written agreements and German good will, Meyer 'failed badly' and the Germans reverted to their original position. Completely frustrated, he concluded that as the Germans now refused to send the children to a state school and that as the English population was too small, 'nothing should be done as yet towards its erection'. He recommended that the groups 'be allowed to settle their own disputes among themselves and when they are willing to let the Department have the building without any conditions as to teacher etc...it can be rented at a nominal rate—but not till then' (73/ 33588, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

Four months passed before agreement was reached between the factions. The Germans remained in a stronger position than the English. They enjoyed control of the building and their children were receiving at least a modicum of education. The English had neither. Both parties realised, however, that some sort of compromise would have to be reached if they were to receive state assistance.

In May 1874 a jointly signed petition requested the establishment of a government school (74/15493, no. 1549, VPRS 795). A July public meeting, chaired by Breen, reaffirmed the newfound unity. An overwhelming majority passed a motion, once again requesting a new school building. Symbolically, it was proposed by Gustav Degenhardt and seconded by Jellett (74/21926, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

Holland reacted quickly and recommended the immediate construction of a school on a site set aside for the purpose. From recent experience he knew that a new building would contribute to greater political stability. The Department, however, was still unwilling to provide funding. Accurate survey information was also unavailable. In December, Breen wrote to the Department and claimed that it had 'inflicted a very great injustice upon [*Sic.*] the people of this place by not providing us with a school' (74/33588, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

In February 1875, after nearly eighteen months of broken promises and unproductive discussions, the Department finally acted. It recommended that Holland re-open negotiations but for rented building only. If one could be found, it promised that a state school could be opened by May (75/6599, no. 1549, VPRS795).

Unknown to the English and much to Holland's dismay, the Germans remained firm in their resolve to appoint a German. Holland realised that as they owned the only building suitable for use as a school, their demand may have to be considered. Meyer, although still teaching at the private German school, was disregarded because of his poor performance at Horsham. It was at this point that Ernst Straube, a former Melbourne resident, ELCV member and Victorian farmer (Hammerton, 1997, pp. 122-123), suggested a Mr John Walther as an eligible candidate. In mid-February, the Department informed Holland: 'Say Mr Walther, a certified teacher will be appointed if building can be rented at a fair rate' (75/6599, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

'John' Walther was the Anglicised name of Johann Walther, a Silesian native who arrived in Melbourne in 1849 as part of Westgarth's immigration scheme (Darragh and Wuchatsch, 1999, chs 2-5). As a seventeen year-old, Johann travelled with his family throughout rural Victoria, most likely with the Straube family, also natives of the same Silesian district. In the early 1850s the Walthers and Straubes bought property together on the outskirts of Melbourne They, and other German families, cleared the land and sold firewood to the fuel-starved city. The community named their settlement Breslau, or 'clearing in a forest'. The partners enjoyed several successful years selling vegetables and establishing stone-fruit orchards. In 1854 Johann married Ernst's sister Christiane. During this period Johann began his lifelong involvement as organist, synod representative and elder of his local ELCV congregation. He also attempted teaching at the local Lutheran school, most likely because of his excellent German education (Morgan, 1969, pp. ii-iv; Pech, c.1959, p. 7). After an unsuccessful visit to the Ballarat goldfields 'John' (used from the late 1850s) renewed his interest in teaching, this time as a life-long vocation. He worked in the ELCV school in central Melbourne from 1858-1866 and then applied for and was accepted as teacher at Connewarre Common School, a state-subsidised one-room

school near Germantown, a German enclave west of Melbourne. In 1874 John's eldest son, Gustav, travelled to Murtoa to meet up with Ernst Straube and his mother. Soon after, Ernst commenced negotiations to secure John's appointment (Rushbrook, 1984, pp. 23-31; Hammerton, 1997, pp. 122-123).

The apparent collusion behind the backs of the English was obviously meeting with success. The school's trustees were only too willing to agree to the Department's proposition. After all, an incompetent German teacher was to be replaced with a competent German teacher and private funding from stretched resources was to be replaced with funding from the public coffers. The subterfuge was made easier through the absence of a transparent and formal state school promotion and transfer system, a process not enacted until the late 1880s (Blake, 1973). The school was offered to the department at six pounds sterling (approximately \$US 14.00) a year, with use reserved for the trustees on Saturdays and Sundays and on weekdays between 5.00 pm and 8.00 am. To make the building comply with Department regulations, its interior space was enlarged through the removal of the sleeping quarters. The trustees re-emphasised to the Department that should Walther be appointed, he would fund the building of a separate private home for his family of ten (75/11226, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

The reaction of the English to the Department's proposal, made public by Holland, was predictable: they felt betrayed. In March 1875 Breen wrote to the Department that a 'suitable' school building was not available, even though he knew that the German school had been finalised three weeks earlier. In the same letter he issued a stern warning: 'I may... mention for the information of the Department that the appointment of Mr Walther as teacher will not be favourably received by the majority of parents of the children of this place' (75/9642, no. 1549, VPRS 795). Holland obviously had underestimated the depth of enmity felt by the English against the Germans.

Trouble at Murtoa State School No. 1549

The Walthers arrived at Murtoa in early May 1875. John immediately set about preparing the German school for its opening on 11 May as State School No. 1549. Following a brief survey of the building and would-be students, he realised that difficult times were ahead. The school, though comfortable and large enough, was poorly equipped and unsuited to sustained use. Students, it was soon apparent, lacked any worthwhile formal education. The English children had never attended school and the Germans under Meyer had only received spasmodic and ineffectual instruction (75/24110 and 75/37122, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

Walther unwittingly added to his educational problems through assuming a high public profile as a German. Soon after his arrival he was appointed as the organist, choirmaster and secretary of the town's ELCV congregation (Morgan, 1969, pp. i-ii). He taught German as an 'extra' subject to the students, a basic tenet of *Deushtum*, and operated an evening school where he met the needs of adult learners, mostly German (*RMPI* 1876-1877, Shelton's report). His alignment with German opinion did little toward enhancing a solution of the factional problems.

English opinion was made obvious to Walther on opening day. Of a total enrolment of 103 children between the ages of 4 to 14 eligible to attend, 37 or 75 per cent of the 55 Germans attended, but only 2 or 4 per cent of the 48 English did likewise. The English, therefore, boycotted both the German school and Walther as a sign of their indignation (Rabl, 1994, p. 23; 76/4893, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

Walther quickly realised that the Department's decision to rent rather than build helped precipitate the English reaction. On 15 May he wrote to the Department urging it to acquire a new school site. As teacher accommodation was a factor in his appointment, he once again used it as a bargaining tool and promised to build a house 'of Weather boards, plastered inside, with galvanised iron roof' next to the school, if a site could be agreed upon. Action was not taken until August when Holland finally gained access to accurate survey information. Once again, he recommended the construction of a new school. His report warned against building on the German School site and supported Walther's strategy: 'At the time of selecting the site there was a feud between the English and German settlers, and the piece of ground on which the German school is erected could not be obtained...for my own part I think it better to build on the two acres already recommended for site' (75/15936, 75/24110, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

The pressure Walther and Holland exerted on the Department had a calming effect on the community. In November 1875 the factions once again allied themselves and collectively demanded a new school (75/24110, no. 1549, VPRS 795). However, in spite of the truce, the English still refused to patronise the school. Average attendance actually declined over these months, even though the number of students on the roll increased by 27 (*RMPI*, 1875-1876).

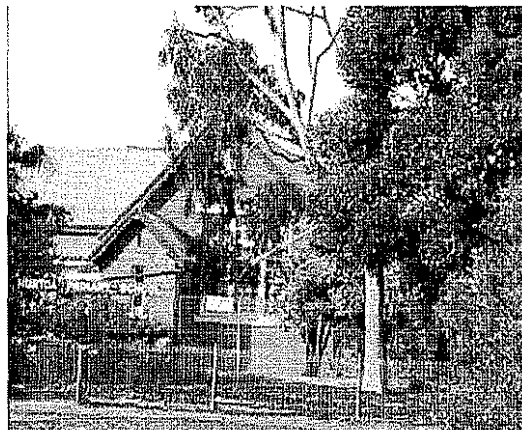
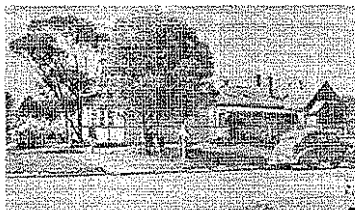
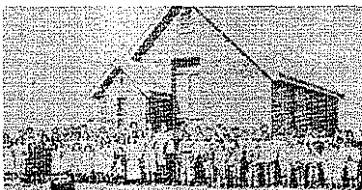
During this community turmoil Walther experienced related difficulties in the work of the school. Given the Education Department's policy of paying teachers according to student attendance and inspector-administered test results in the 'Three R's' (called 'Payment by Results'), Walther experienced the worry of a declining income (*RMPI*, 1875-1881). He was devastated when the base

new school percentile result of 60 soon declined to less than 50. Little could be done to teach his students effectively until the building was properly equipped. It was over six months before desks and books for 'the course of free instruction' finally arrived (75/32657, no. 1549, VPRS 795). He was fortunate during this difficult time to receive the continued assistance of Christiane as the school's work-mistress.

School inspectors expressed sympathy for his problems. In 1875 Holland reported that he 'appears to be thoroughly painstaking and careful—possessed of good experience as a teacher'. In 1876 Holland's replacement, Shelton, wrote less enthusiastically that he 'possesses very fair ability for the management of a school of this size' (History Section, VED, 1980). From this time school attendance increased slowly, including a growing number of English.

In February 1876 a breakthrough occurred: the Education Department gazetted two acres as a 'Site for Public Purpose' (VGG, 1876, p. 339). But by October no action had been taken. In desperation, Walther wrote an urgent letter claiming that he could not admit any more students into the German school building. In February 1877 the Department relented and called for tenders to erect a school building made of solid brick with a slate roof. A contract was awarded to a building company in Ballarat, over one hundred miles away (76/3729, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

After twenty-six months of struggle, on 3 September 1877, the new school opened. With great fanfare and song, Walther ceremoniously marched the students to the new building through Murtoa's dusty streets (Crouch, 1983). For the community, it was a cathartic experience, in spite of the inadequacy of the school's toilets and lack of sufficient desks (77/34358, no. 1549, VPRS 795).



Over the next four years Walther's emotions ran from hope to despair. As the focal point of the school's operations he rode the waves of community change and remote bureaucratic administration. Initially he thought that the new school would go some way to rectify the problems of community rivalry and poor attendance and results. The stigma attached to the old school was gone and for the first time he could concentrate on teaching both Germans and English without fear of recrimination. His wish to live peacefully in a German community now appeared to be a reality. With the assistance a Education Department compensation payment that allowed for the ructions caused by the 1872 Education Act (including declining results payments because of new compulsory attendance regulations), John built his promised house next to the school. He soon held a wedding reception there for the marriage of his eldest child, Pauline. During these happy months he also qualified as a singing teacher (*RMPI*, 1876; Morgan, 1969, pp. i-ii; Crouch, 1983).

But when John's payment results continued to be mediocre, his early optimism was crushed. After mentally and physically taxing himself to the point of exhaustion, with little apparent reward, it appeared that resignation was the only option. On 22 and 23 May 1878 he absented himself from school to attend the Horsham land Board (78/17993, no. 1549, VPRS 795). With fond memories of bygone days as a farmer he selected and paid for a lease of 320 acres at Ni Ni, a new German community not far from Murtoa. In shaky handwriting, he notified the Department that he was finding it 'more and more difficult to command the energy required in carrying out the duties involving upon me as a teacher'. He also indicated he was going to sell his house (78/20179, no. 1549, VPRS 795).

However, by the end of the year Walther's emotional pendulum shifted. In December 1878 he used his considerable musical talents to perform in a community 'entertainment of a musical and elocutionary character', playing a number of piano solos and singing 'What the Wild Waves are Saying'. A reviewer wrote that the 'performers acquitted themselves very fairly, most notable being the pianoforte solo of Mr Walther' (*Dunmunkle Standard*, 6 December 1878).

A number of factors contributed to his change of demeanour. In December 1878 the railway was extended from Melbourne through Murtoa to Horsham, establishing the area as a key point for the shipment of wheat and wool (Hammerton, 1997, pp. 17-20). A consequent increase in English farmers and townspeople tempered German domination of the school, engendering a spirit of moderation and consensus. The school population consequently increased, necessitating changes in staff. By 1879 there were over one hundred students in average attendance, a number that, under departmental regulations prevented Christiane, an unqualified work-mistress, from teaching (*VGG* 1879, p. 1262). She was unceremoniously replaced by a third class assistant and a pupil-teacher. An infant room was

added as the population continued to boom. John's results also improved, climbing to over 75 per cent, no doubt encouraging a feeling of success (*RMPI*, 1878-1881). This was further bolstered by excellent inspectors' reports (History Section, VED, 1980).

Though pleased by these events, Walther's thoughts were elsewhere. Murtoa was becoming too large, awakening a chronic dislike of large schools, and it harboured too many unpleasant memories. With a flash of inspiration, or perhaps careful planning, he decided to apply for the position of teacher at Ni Ni. He was supported in his cause through a petition jointly signed by the area's German and English population (79/23921, VPRS 898; 80/8078, VPRS 898). This presented a more promising start than his clandestine arrival at Murtoa. After several interruptions, John accepted the position from 1 June 1881 (80/39714, VPRS 898). Walther retired to Murtoa in 1891 and was buried in its cemetery in 1917. In spite of his difficulties from 1875-1881, he and the community finally reconciled their differences. John Walther remains an honoured community founder (Rushbrook, 1984). However, no further German-born teachers were ever appointed as head teacher to Murtoa State School No. 1549.

Conclusion

The story of building Murtoa's one-room school, first as a private German school and later as Murtoa State School No. 1549, is an excellent example of localised cultural politics. In a young colony that assumed British cultural hegemony, in spite of internal contradictions, the German assertion of traditional culture, religion and values challenged its assumptions and practices. In a curious twist, British culture was simplified to living simply as 'English'. German Lutheran collectivism, resolve and unbending faith re-emphasised British individualism and competitiveness, leading to the tensions of settlement. However, over time a working consensus was reached through increased cultural familiarity and acceptance of difference, though such differences emerged yet again in the two world wars of the early and mid-twentieth century. In the twenty-first century the Wimmera no longer practices German communalism or cultural exclusivism. Vestiges, however, remain. Murtoa continues to have Old Lutheran and ELCV adherents (though renamed); families retain German words in everyday speech; a private Lutheran school maintains the faith; and the area's heritage is proudly celebrated.

The history of one-room schooling has been told both sporadically and sparsely in the story of Australian education. While existing studies are informative (for example, Selleck and Sullivan, 1984; Freeman, 1986; Moore, 1999; Whitehead, 2001), the area remains largely unexplored. Within this genre, studies of the politics of establishing small schools in rural areas are consequently rare,

particularly when involving a clash of European cultures. This study is one small contribution to this fascinating field.

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