

## GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (October 1998)

By Rob Upson

### THE FIRST PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION – BENDIGO 1855

In 1894, the Bendigo Art Gallery acquired an oil painting, by Theodore K. King, entitled '*The First Parliamentary Election, Bendigo 1855*.' It depicts Dr. John Downes Owens addressing a group of diggers from the balcony of Wallach's Criterion Hotel. On a large blue flag, fluttering from an adjacent flagpole, are the words ELECTION of Dr. OWENS FIRST MEMBER for the GOLDFIELDS.

Dr. Owens, qualifying as an MD in 1841 and a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, came to the Bendigo goldfields in 1852. He became active in the anti gold-license agitation when it was proposed to increase this license fee from 30 shillings to 3 a month. In August 1853, a mass meeting was held in Bendigo to protest this fee increase and every digger who was sympathetic to the cause wore a red ribbon as a badge. What they really wanted was to have the license fee abolished and in December of the same year, a public meeting at View Point, chaired by Dr Owens, demanded '*no taxation without representation*'.

This and other subsequent meetings led to Dr Owens being nominated as the digger's representative of all the goldfields in the old Legislative Assembly in 1855. In August 1859, General Elections for the Legislative Assembly - under the new Electoral Act - enabled the Sandhurst boroughs to have two members each. Dr. Owens was nominated for Mandurang but retired from the contest. However, he was elected for Mandurang in the 1861 elections but resigned in July 1863, presumably because most of his political views were contrary to those of the majority of the Assembly. He did not re-enter public life and died suddenly in Melbourne in 1866 at the age of 57.

Not much is known about the artist, Theodore King. He came from Cornwall and was a miner on the Avoca goldfields when he painted this picture. Apart from exhibiting a couple of other oil paintings at the Melbourne Inter-colonial Exhibition in 1866, he left very little of his artistry behind him.

The Criterion Hotel was opened in May 1854, on the corner of Mundy and Hopetoun Streets, where the offices of Ashman Ralph & Associates now stand. It was built in partnership by Joseph Wallach (the Licensee), a Mr Saloshin and Messrs. Moritz, Julius and Jacob Cohn at a cost of 20,000. The three Cohn brothers went on to establish a soft drink factory in Bridge St. in 1856 and Bendigo's first brewery the following year.

The Criterion was the leading hotel in the district at the time and was *most elegantly appointed*. During Vice Regal visits to the area, the Governor usually stayed at the Criterion, including Sir Charles Hotham and Sir Henry Barkly.

The hotel overlooked Market Square, the area between the Town Hall and Mundy St., and with its spacious balcony provided the forum for many a public meeting including those relating to the goldfield's grievances and agitations.

*Reference :- The Bendigo Art Gallery and The Annals of Bendigo*