

Eureka and Victoria's chair of state

In the 19th century, an appropriately draped “chair of state” under a canopy was deployed on formal occasions when the monarch or her vice-regal representative was present. These chairs were conspicuously larger than any surrounding chairs, acknowledging the status of the occupant. Dr La Nauze traces the history of Victoria's chair of state made c 1859, outlining the role Flint Ramsay & Co played in its genesis, and the ambiguous symbolism of the Southern Cross.

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An elaborate gilt chair of state used in Victoria for over 150 years stands in the ballroom of Government House in Melbourne. Today it remains at Government House, though in the 19th century it was often transported to venues that were to be attended by regal or vice-regal representatives and was thus familiar to many Melbournians.

The chair's original upholstery included two embroidered eight-point stars that, with three carved stars, formed the Southern Cross. Queen Victoria's monogram was embroidered within this iconic symbol below a carved banner proclaiming “Advance Victoria”. This ambiguous symbolism can be interpreted either as the monarch holding dominion over her Victorian subjects or as the monarch subservient to the will of the newly won democratic reforms in Victoria.

The chair has been renovated at least three times, obscuring the symbolic meaning of the decoration that, immediately after the Eureka uprising, Victorians would have understood. This tangible link to a period of significant democratic reforms has been inadvertently lost.

The State Chair

Victoria's chair of state, commonly known as the “State Chair”, is Elizabethan Revival in style (**plate 1**). It is made of gilded wood with an upholstered, arched back and barley-twist side columns, surmounted by a crown under which “Advance Victoria” is carved on a banner. Carved on either side



1.

The Victorian state chair, published with permission of the Office of the Governor



2.

The Victorian state chair in the ballroom of Government House, Melbourne. Photograph taken by James Renner and Michael Ritchie, Office of the Governor, 1994

and immediately below the crown are three eight-pointed stars. The front upholstered arms terminate in carved lion's heads.

The right leg bears a shield with the cross of St George (England & Wales) surrounded by a garter, while the left leg bears the saltire cross of St Andrew (Scotland) similarly surrounded. Centrally below the seat is carved the floral emblem of Ireland, the shamrock. The official brochure issued by the Victorian Government in 1994 illustrates the setting surrounding the state chair in the ballroom of Government House (plate 2).¹

In 1876 when the new residence for the Governor on the Domain was completed, *The Argus* reported that:

at the head of the [ball] room, on a raised dais will be placed the Governor's chair, which is the same piece of furniture which has done duty as the state chair for the last 16 years. It is being renovated, and will be as good as ever.²

This report infers that the state chair was made circa 1860. The report also stated that:

All the old furniture from Toorak, which was made by Messrs Thwaites and Son 20 years ago, is being renovated, and will be used in the new building. That this furniture should now be fit to be placed in the new Government House speaks well for the makers.

George Thwaites & Son were renovating furniture that they had supplied to *Toorak House* 22 years earlier just prior to the arrival of Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham in 1854. Since, in 1876, the state chair was also being renovated, it has been not unreasonably assumed that Geo. Thwaites & Son were undertaking its renovation.³ While Thwaites is likely to have effected this refurbishment, extending the attribution to its manufacture by Thwaites is more problematical.



Blackie and Son's *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant*, may have inspired the design for the state chair, as it resonates with one of the "Antique State Chairs" shown in plate lxi, (**plate 3**).⁴ Blackie's pattern book reached the colony very soon after its publication in 1853 and was widely used as inspiration for contemporary furniture, including the furniture that George Thwaites made for *Toorak House* in 1854.

From the colony's earliest days through to the death of Hotham in late 1855, several different chairs can be identified as having been used as chairs of state. For example, at the inaugural Legislative Council sitting on 13 November 1851, Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe sat in an upholstered wing-backed chair of state of quite modest proportions compared with the current state chair.

A search of the register of government accounts for the period 1856 to 1859 gives rise to only one contract for supply of furniture to the Governor. On 1 August 1856, Thomas Chuck of Bourke Street was paid £50 for "supplying furniture for his Excellency the Governor" who at the time was the colonial administrator Colonel Edward MacArthur.⁵ As caretaker governor, and so soon after the imbroglio concerning the furniture purchased for Hotham and the antipathy towards the Queen's representative, it is unlikely that MacArthur would have placed an order for a chair of state.

The Age reported that a silver medal was awarded to McKendrick and McEwan for exhibiting a "state chair" at the Victoria Industrial Society exhibition held in December 1856.⁶ Twenty years later James McEwan was, along with Thwaites, to supply furniture to the Governor's residence on the Domain. However, a link between the exhibited piece and the state chair has not been established and the specificity of the c 1860 date for the state chair mentioned in the 1876 press report suggests that this 1856 chair is not the existing chair.

Ramsay Brothers and the Royal Birthday Ball 1859

In searching for a reference to a state chair c 1860, the closest I have found is a chair described at the Royal Birthday Ball held on the evening of 28 June 1859:

The Royal Birthday Ball ... came off yesterday evening at the Exhibition Building, and may be justly pronounced a success in every respect ... The building was most tastefully decorated with flags of all nations, and over the vice-regal chair, a handsome dais was erected, the colors of the 40th Regiment, with their many honourable names, and the British ensign, being suspended on either side. The chair of State, as well as the couches, were manufactured by Messrs. Ramsey [*sic*], and deserve

3.

Detail of the Victorian state chair (published with permission of the Office of the Governor) compared to detail of "Antique State Chairs", figure 2, plate lxi from Blackie and Son's *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant* published in 1853

mention from the taste displayed in their design and the skill shown in their manufacture.⁷

"Messrs. Ramsey" were the brothers Flint and David Ramsay who operated as Flint Ramsay & Co, importing English and Scottish furniture. *The Age* report of the ball provides further important details:

Facing the principal entrance a canopy was erected for his Excellency, under which was placed the chair of State. The canopy was a very tasteful work of art, as was also the chair of State, and the decorations were of the most superb and *recherché* description. Over the canopy were the illuminated letters "V.A." [*sic*] and the royal arms. ... The whole arrangements were under



4.

Exhibition Hall in preparation for the opening in 1869 of the first public art exhibition, Melbourne. The state chair surrounded by chairs from the public library attributed to Geo. Thwaites & Son. Detail from photograph taken by Charles Nettleton, State Library of Victoria acc no H12962

the immediate superintendence and direction of Mr Cassidy, his Excellency's steward ...

The chair of State ... was covered in crimson velvet, the wood work being white, with gold mouldings, and surmounted with the Royal Arms. It was manufactured by Messrs Ramsay Brothers and Co., by whom the whole of the furniture, which was of the most gorgeous description, was constructed and supplied, with the exception of the canopy, of which we shall merely state that it was all the most fastidious could desire. This was made by Messrs Hickinbotham.⁸

Before the opening of the first public art exhibition in the Exhibition Hall, Melbourne, in 1869, Charles Nettleton photographed the state chair surrounded by chairs from the public library (**plate 4**).⁹ Today the state chair is fully gilded, not partially gilded with white painted wood as described above. However, the differences in reflected light on the chair apparent in Nettleton's 1869 sepia

photographic print show clearly that the state chair in its original manifestation was substantially white-painted wood with only the barley-twists and crown gilded. The original seat was not upholstered but consisted of a studded red morocco cushion probably stuffed with horse hair. The back was upholstered in red velvet on which the VR monogram and two eight-pointed stars were embroidered.

Little is known about the Ramsay brothers, though in *The Age* of 12 November 1858 they placed three separate advertisements as "importers of furniture, carpets and house furnishings"; as valuers of "household furniture, hotels and general estate" and producers of "mirrors, silvered in the colony". No evidence has been found that the Ramsay brothers made furniture themselves; rather they seem to have imported items or commissioned local cabinet-makers especially to fit their mirrors or they supplied mirrors to other furniture manufacturers. Gilt items would have been sent out to specialist gilders.¹⁰

While the state chair is an imposing piece, the carving on the chair is not of high quality and certainly not of the quality of the carved Thwaites-made chairs and sideboards transferred from *Toorak House*. Yet, given its specificity to the state of Victoria, it was assuredly made in the colony. I thus conclude that the Ramsay brothers supplied the state chair for the Royal Birthday Ball of 1859, though it was probably manufactured, carved and gilded by others in Melbourne. No record has been found to attribute the making of this chair to Geo. Thwaites & Son but this firm is the most likely cabinet-maker to have restored it in 1876.

The state chair as a star witness

During the period of Sir Henry Barkly's governorship (1856–63), the state chair came into regular use and from 1859 onwards, the chair found itself a central witness to important formal occasions in the life of colonial Melbourne. After its appearance at the 1859 Royal Birthday Ball, the chair of state was, for instance,

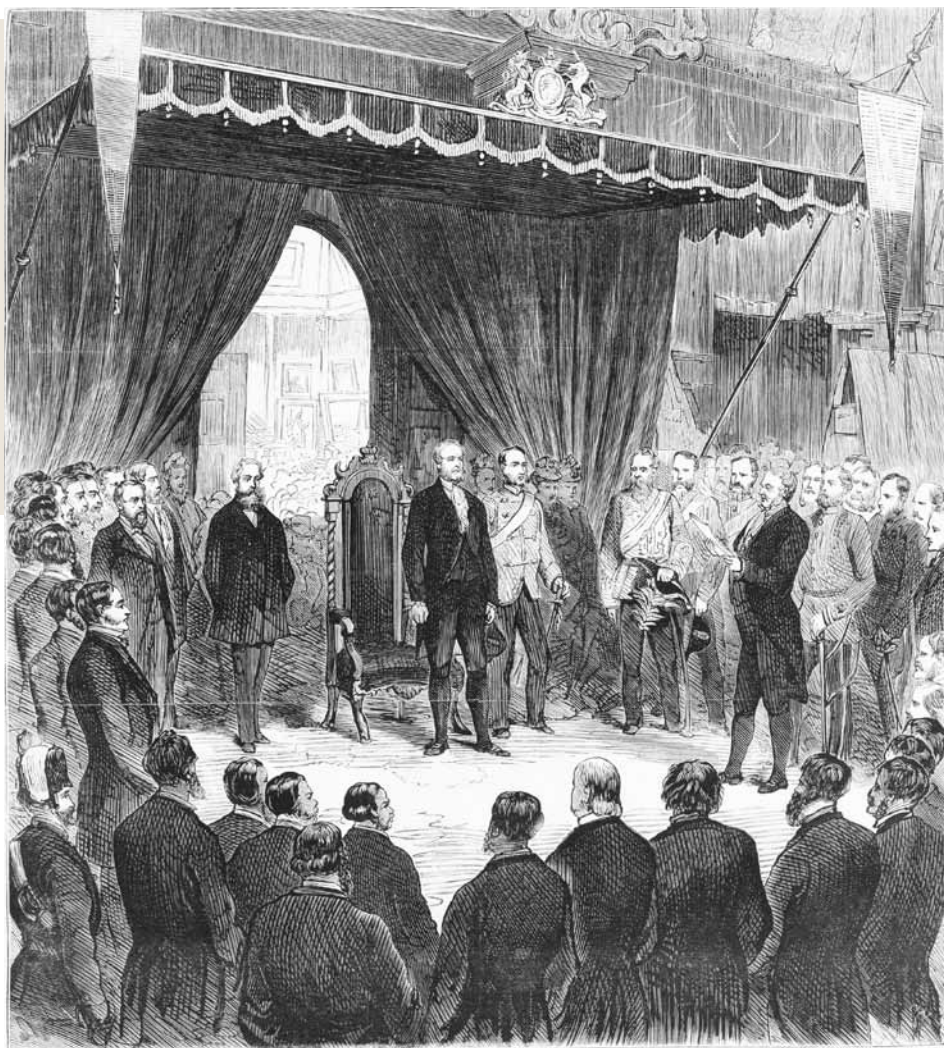
5.

Sir Redmond Barry reads the presidential address to the acting Governor, Sir William Stawell, at the opening ceremony for the 1875 Intercolonial Exhibition. The state chair takes centre stage. Wood engraving by Samuel Calvert, State Library of Victoria, acc no IAN06/09/75/145

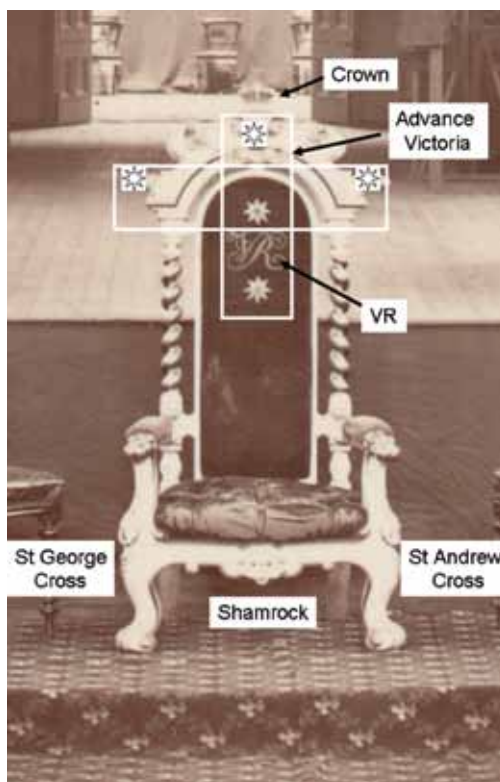
used at the investiture of Major-General Thomas Pratt as Knight Commander of the Bath. Pratt (1797–1879) was appointed KCB for his services as commander of Australian and New Zealand troops in the Maori wars of 1860. He was invested with the insignia by Governor Barkly, his son-in-law, at the Exhibition Buildings on 15 April 1862, the first such investiture in Australia.¹¹

At the upper end, under a canopy of crimson velvet, ornamented with a yellow fringe and tassels was placed the Chair of State, also covered with crimson velvet, and bearing the royal initials.¹²

In 1875, produce and wares from the Australian colonies were on display in Melbourne at the Intercolonial Exhibition. During the opening ceremony, the acting governor, Sir William Stawell, stood in front of the state chair while the exhibition president, Sir Redmond Barry, gave his address (plate 5). Stawell was attired in the costume of an Administrator of the Government and the readers of the *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* were urged to note that such attire bore “close resemblance to ordinary court costume, the principal, if not only difference being the color of the silk stockings worn”.¹³ The reporter omitted to detail the actual colour to



THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE INTERCOLONIAL EXHIBITION



6.

The Victorian state chair with original decorations showing the manner in which the cabinet-maker encompassed the Queen's monogram and the “Advance Victoria” banner within the Southern Cross. The location of the three carved eight-point stars is indicated, the other two are embroidered on the chair back. Detail from 1869 photograph by Charles Nettleton, State Library of Victoria acc no H12962



7.

"Flag of the Southern Cross",
the 1854 Eureka Flag

the two embroidered eight-pointed stars have been omitted.

The forgotten symbolism

In order to understand the significance of the symbolic meaning of the motifs carved and embroidered on the state chair, it is necessary to return to earlier times.

On a winter's day in June 1854, the arrival of the new vice-regal couple, Sir Charles and Lady Hotham, was announced by salvoes of artillery. Gathered along the route to Melbourne, cheering crowds welcomed the new Lieutenant-Governor with expectant goodwill. Crossing Prince's Bridge, the official party passed through a triumphal arch; on one side were the arms of the Hotham family and on the other, the colonial arms. Overhead, wooden models of a kangaroo, an emu and a sailor held sway below a gilt crown.

The triumphant scene was completed by a banner proclaiming "Victoria welcomes Victoria's choice"¹⁵ – a banner, according to author William Kelly, that was the best of the "gushing transports of composition ... glorious in its conception, alterative in its alliteration, and, like many of the immortal Wordsworth's lines, almost mystical in its simplicity."

However, the colonists understood it, if the reader don't [*sic*], and

the inconceivable ingenuity and versatility they evinced in applying it, and making all the beasts of the earth, the birds of the air peculiar to the happy land, appear to comprehend and appreciate the line, was enough in itself to stamp the Melbournites as 'citizens of genius and renown.'¹⁶

While espousing democratic reforms, Hotham's authoritarian behaviour soon lost him the support of his Executive Council and government officials. Hotham considered the armed actions at the Eureka stockade, Ballarat, in December 1854 as a sign of general insurrection. His refusal to grant an amnesty for the Eureka prisoners and his desire to maintain a mining fee, despite the Legislative Council passing reform measures for the gold licence system, saw his political capital collapse.

In February 1855 he was raised to Governor but he had lost favour in London. In November he tendered his resignation and on 17 December, with his health failing, he caught a chill while opening the Melbourne gasworks and died at *Toorak House* on 31 December 1855.¹⁷

After Hotham's death a period of relative parliamentary stability descended under the stewardship of Edward MacArthur, the colony's Administrator, and then under the new governor, Sir Henry Barkly. Barkly, soon after his arrival on Christmas Eve 1856, realised that "the governor's participation in policy-making was not welcome under the newly-granted responsible government" and "adjusted to his new functions as a constitutional 'sovereign'".¹⁸

Nettleton's 1869 photograph of the state chair shows clearly the original embroidered back of the chair with Queen Victoria's monogram; below and above her VR cipher are two embroidered eight-pointed stars that must be read in conjunction with the three carved eight-pointed stars (**plate 6**). The carved stars were originally painted white and were not easily discernible. Together, the five eight-pointed stars align to form a stylised version of the Southern Cross

the regret, no doubt, of his readers.

In the redecorations of 1890, the chair was upholstered in peacock-blue velvet to match the room furnishings:

... in the ball-room the scheme of colouring is entirely in peacock-blue plush, which constitutes a splendid set-off to the lovely coloring. The settees, canopy, throne-chairs, and partières for the openings into the buffet are of the same material. The centre chair on the dais is worked in gold cross wire, with the V.R. in a larger and more elaborate style than formerly, and the upholstery is in rolled and tufted peacock plush matching the other drapings.¹⁴

Today, the chair is fully gilded and has been upholstered again in 'peacock-blue' velvet – a colour scheme which derives from redecorations in 1890 – though nowadays, the monarch's monogram and

constellation, as deployed on the Eureka flag, where each star also has eight points (plate 7). Interpreting the symbolism today without knowing the social attitude and political persuasion of the chair's instigators is speculative, but there is no doubt that the Southern Cross was there for all who took the time to see it and without doubt those who recognised it made their own interpretations.

From the earliest colonial times, the emblematic Southern Cross appears in various guises: patriotic displays, banknotes and the Eureka Flag reputedly derived from the Australian Federation Flag of 1831, in which the five stars represented the five Australian colonies. In the immediate aftermath of the Eureka uprising on 3 December 1854, press reporting described the flag as the "Australian Flag" though later it was described as the rebel flag.¹⁹

Thus, one might interpret the symbolism as a nationalistic statement or merely a symbol of the colony of Victoria asserting itself as part of Victoria's empire. Another might see the cross and stars as representing the movement to democracy or a rebellion against the establishment. "From Eureka to 1858 conservatives [in Victoria]... were on the run" though "the counter-attack came in 1858, with the return of economic discipline, and [with the failure] of the campaign for equal electorates".²⁰ This was the context surrounding the craftsmen who made the state chair.

The stars clearly mark the state chair as being made in the colony. Such symbolism was etched deeply into the psyche of those who, like parliamentarian Peter Lalor, had been at the Eureka uprising, and those of liberal persuasion who had experienced the turbulent period leading up to the transition to responsible government. One can interpret the symbolism as Queen Victoria exerting her rule over Victoria or alternatively Queen Victoria captured within the Southern Cross (be it the Australian or Eureka flag or otherwise) with the banner proclaiming Advance Victoria. The alterative power of the symbolism, most assuredly, in Kelly's words, was sufficient for the citizens "to comprehend and appreciate the line" and

thus to stamp Melbournians as "citizens of genius and renown."²¹

The designer of the state chair, whoever he was, clearly wanted to make a point. Perhaps the artisan was silently asserting the young colony's democratic aspirations since despite inertia in the establishment, this period had achieved "self-government, the ballot for both houses, and—for the Assembly—manhood suffrage, abolition of members' property qualification, redistribution of electorates, and three-yearly elections."²² Whatever his motivation, some Melbournians at the time must have been aware of the hidden message and interpreted it according to their political persuasions.

Regrettably, subsequent restoration of the state chair has erased this powerful symbol and Victorians have inadvertently lost a tangible link to this remarkable liberalising period of their colonial history.

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Dr Robert La Nauze's biography, *Engineer to Marvellous Melbourne: the life and times of William Thwaites*, was short-listed for the History Publication Award, Victorian Community History Awards, 2012. He is currently writing a history of the Melbourne-based colonial cabinetmaking firm of Geo. Thwaites & Son. Contact him at roblanauze@gmail.com.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas Hazell (text), James Renner and Michael Ritchie (photographs), *Government House, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*, Melbourne, Office of the Governor, 1994, p 7.
- 2 *Argus* 20 May 1876, p 8.
- 3 Terence Lane & Jennifer Shaw, *List of 19th*

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- 4 Anon, *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant Original Designs for Furniture*, Glasgow, Edinburgh, London and New York, 1853, figure 2, plate LXIX, 'Antique State Chairs'.
- 5 PROV 973/P/000/0001 Register of Accounts. Entry 1107, p 191, 1 Aug 1856.
- 6 *The Age* 12 Dec 1856, p 3.
- 7 *Argus* 29 Jun 1859, p 5.
- 8 *The Age* 29 Jun 1859, p 5.
- 9 Charles Nettleton, photograph, *Interior of exhibition hall, Public Library Art Exhibition 1869*, Melbourne, State Library of Victoria, accession no. H12962; Geo. Thwaites & Son supplied chairs for the public library in two tranches of 100 each in 1864 and 1867.
- 10 *The Age* 12 Nov 1858, p 7. The Ramsay brothers silvering business was reviewed in *The Argus* 4 Aug 1860, p 5; evidence of sub-contracting gilding may be found in *The Argus* 16 Jan 1861, p 1s.
- 11 Ronald McNicoll, "Pratt, Sir Thomas Simson (1797–1879)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pratt-sir-thomas-simson-4414/text7205>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 10 May 2015.
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- 13 *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* 6 Oct 1875, p 145; 6 Oct 1875 p 154f; Calvert Samuel, Wood Engraving, The Opening Ceremony of the Intercolonial Exhibition, *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* 6 Oct 1875, State Library of Victoria IAN06/09/75/145.
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- 16 William Kelly, *Life in Victoria or Victoria 1853, and Victoria 1858*, London, Chapman & Hall; Melbourne, George Robertson, 1860, vol II, pp 47–50.
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- 18 B A Knox, *op cit*
- 19 For reference to the 'Australian Flag' see, for example, *Geelong Advertiser and Intelligencer* 4 Dec 1854, p 4; *The Age* 4 Dec 1854, p 5; *Argus* 5 Dec 1854, p 4.
- 20 Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851–1861*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1963, p 378.
- 21 *Ibid* p 200f; Kelly *op cit* p 47.
- 22 Serle, *op cit* p 378.