

The Dunedin Exhibition Suite

made by J M Wendt (1830-1917)

Leading Australian silver expert throws new light on an elaborate silver centrepiece and accompanying tazzas made for the Dunedin Exhibition of 1865



The 1865 Dunedin
Exhibition Building
from the *Illustrated*
London News

John Hawkins

Dunedin, the Gaelic name for Edinburgh, was founded by the Lay Association of the Free Church of Scotland on the South Island of New Zealand in 1848 and transformed by the discovery of gold in central Otago, southwest of Dunedin in 1861. By 1865 it had become the largest city in New Zealand.

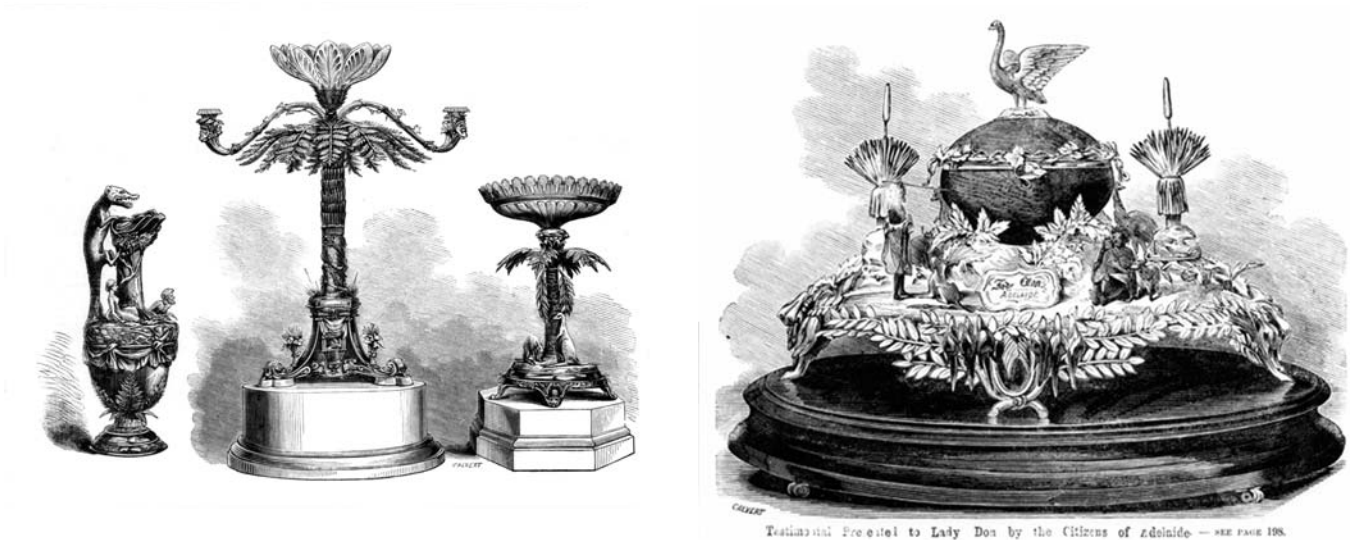
The rush started at Gabriel's Gully, named after Tasmanian born Gabriel Read who had prospected for gold in both California and Victoria before arriving in Otago in 1861. He discovered gold in a creek bed close to the banks of the Tuapeka River near Lawrence on 20 May 1861. By Christmas of that year 14,000 prospectors were on the Tuapeka and Waipori

fields, a second major discovery in 1862 did nothing to dissuade new hopefuls.

Like many gold prospectors, professional businessmen made their way to the goldfields to establish services for the miners, including stores, post offices, banks, pubs and hotels. The men who owned these businesses often made more money than the miners.

It was this Dunedin business community that decided to hold an exhibition in 1865 to show the merits of New Zealand and create new business for those who were successful as a result of the gold rushes. It was to be the first exhibition in New Zealand, a celebration by a city created by gold only seventeen years earlier.

The Exhibition Building is an example of the power of gold to create instant wealth. Among the highlights were a candelabra epergne and two tazzas of outstanding quality made by the Adelaide goldsmith J M Wendt. The *North Otago Times* of 9 March 1865 described... *tables containing splendid samples of manufactures in the precious metals. Those which attract most attention are a group from Adelaide, manufactured by Mr Wendt, of that city. As a guide in designing the central piece, which is a solid silver epergne and candelabrium, Mr Wendt obtained from Otago samples of our tree-fern and has used its forms for the principal standard of the piece. Around the base of this fine piece of workmanship, sheep with their shepherds, emus, kangaroos, cattle, and horses, are all depicted. The grass-tree of Australia, and a little creeping plant, are beautifully delineated. In these and in the cornicopaes which complete the*



ornamentation, the artist has been more successful than in his treatment of the tree-fern, the noble grace of which has not been realised.

This is an unfortunate comment as the New Zealand tree fern is no match for the Australian tree fern the *Dixonia*, the actual source of Wendt's inspiration.

The connection between Wendt and the New Zealand town of Dunedin is most likely to be John Lazar (1801-1879),¹ Dunedin's Town Clerk. Lazar, who was born in Edinburgh, arrived in Sydney on 26 February 1837 under the name of Lazarus. He claimed to be a tailor and also to have appeared on the London stage. In 1848 Lazar became associated with George Selth Coppin who had successfully established the New Queen's Theatre in Adelaide. John Lazar occupies an important place in that city's theatrical history since his was the first serious theatrical enterprise undertaken.

He enjoyed considerable popularity and was frequently praised in contemporary newspapers for his endeavours both as a manager and as actor. In the 1850s Lazar established a jeweller's and silversmith's business in Hindley Street, Adelaide. Using He became active in local government, becoming an alderman of the Adelaide City Council in 1853 and mayor of Adelaide between 1855 and 1858. He retired from the Council in 1859 and in 1863 migrated to New Zealand where he became the Town Clerk of Dunedin.

Plate from *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 18 July 1865, p. 100, showing Wendt's exhibits at the Dunedin Exhibition: candelabra epergne, one of the smaller tazzas and the claret jug, engraved by Samuel Calvert before being taken to New Zealand. Samuel Calvert commenced his career in Adelaide where he arrived in 1848 leaving for Melbourne in 1852. Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library

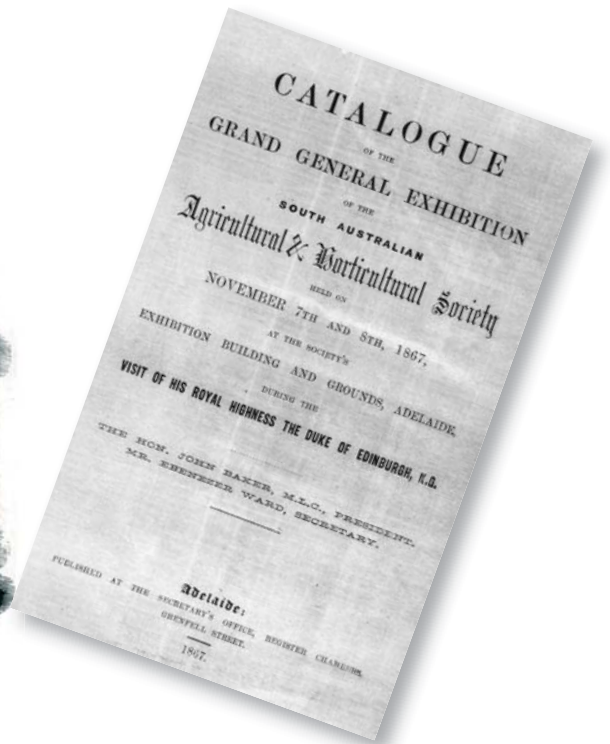
Julius Schomburgk (b. Germany 1812 arrived Australia 1850 d. 1893), maker, J.M. Wendt (b. Germany 1830 arrived Australia 1854 d. 1917), retailer, Lady Don Inkwell. The inkwell which was valued at 100 guineas, engraved by Calvert for the *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, and described as the testimonial to Lady Don. 'Presented to Lady Don by the citizens of Adelaide as a token of respect and esteem.' Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library

In the small city of Adelaide, Lazar would undoubtedly have come across Wendt. An inkwell retailed by Wendt was given to Sir William and Lady Don, titled professional actors, which was highly unusual at this period. Sir William stood nearly 6ft 7in tall. They were employed by the father of the Australian theatre, George Coppin, one time Adelaide partner of John Lazar. The presentation was made by Samuel Lazar, son of John and also a theatre manager and producer.² The letters of presentation and acceptance were quoted in the newspaper. This presentation provides a further link between Coppin, John Lazar, his son Samuel and the firm of Wendt.

An earlier inkwell, of comparable design, together with four silver mounted emu eggs also



Pair of tazzas given to George McLean. Inscribed 'Presented to Geo McLean Esq. by the Officers of the Bank of New Zealand in Otago on his retiring from the management of [the] Dunedin Branch Nov 1865.' Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library



made by Wendt was shown at the 1862 London Exhibition. It was purchased by the Adelaide Archery Club as a gift to Lady MacDonnell.

As Town Clerk of Dunedin, Lazar was therefore an obvious contact for Wendt who probably saw the New Zealand gold rush and little or no competition as a good idea for future orders and sales, especially with Lazar as his contact. He would have held high hopes of the Dunedin exhibition. At the event he sold the pair of tazzas as a presentation to one of Dunedin's leading citizens as described in the *North Otago Times* of 22 February 1866.

Those of your readers who visited the Exhibition, will remember some beautiful specimens of work in silver and gold, exhibited by Mr Wendt of Adelaide. These were to have been disposed of by a raffle after the close of the Exhibition, but in the mean time, hard times had come upon Dunedin, and the raffle fell through. A suitable use was found the other day for a pair of silver tazzas, which formed part of this collection when the officers of the Bank of New Zealand, who are resident in Otago, presented them to Mr G. McLean as a token of regret at his retirement from the management of the Bank in Dunedin.

The tazzas remained in New Zealand with George McLean (1834-1917), a Scottish settler

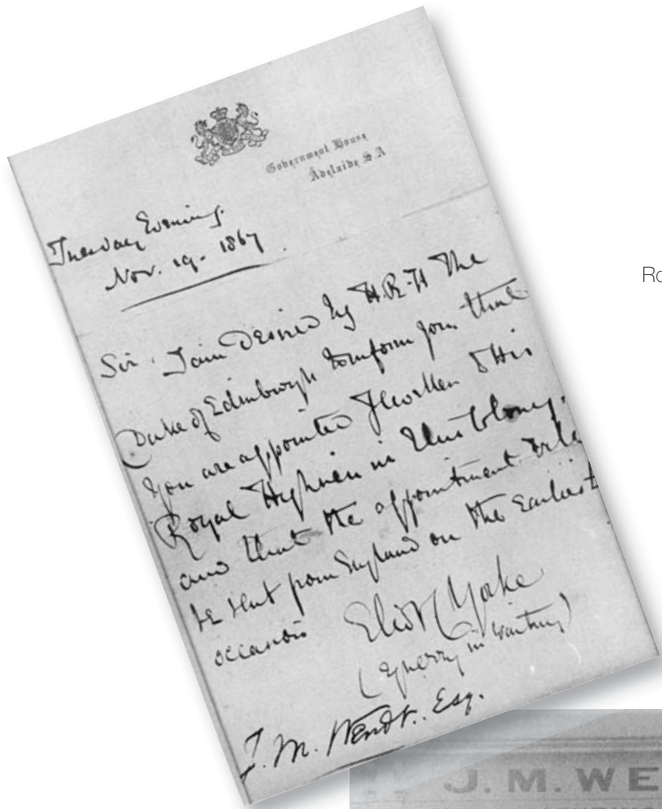
from Edinburgh who played an important part in the commercial and financial life of New Zealand.³ The candelabra epergne however did not sell and returned to South Australia to remain with Wendt until 1889. This was exhibited with an extended suite of tazzas in Melbourne in 1866. The suite described as 'one epergne of sterling silver... and two pairs of tazzas of sterling silver.'

The two pairs of tazzas stood on superbly crafted cockatoo pierced feet like those sent to Dunedin with which they were originally ensuited. Wendt replaced the sold pair with another pair slightly more ornate. This pair was decorated with brolgas and kangaroos. He brought the suite back to Adelaide on the completion of the Melbourne exhibition.

The following year, the city of Adelaide and the people of South of Australia decided to celebrate the Duke of Edinburgh's visit in 1867 with an exhibition of the products of the state, minting a gold medal supplied by Wendt to be handed out by the Duke to the leading exhibitors. The Duke's attendance at the South Australian Agricultural and Horticultural Society on 7 November 1867 provided an opportunity for all the major South Australian presentations to His Royal Highness to be exhibited. J D Woods states:

Illustrated Melbourne Post, 24 December 1866, p. 389. It should be noted that the Dunedin candelabrum epergne reappears still as a candelabra not an epergne. At this Melbourne Exhibition of 1866 Wendt exhibits another pair of the Dunedin epergnes ensuited with pierced cockatoo feet to those received by McLean. These four illustrated epergnes and Swan centrepiece were purchased by the Duke of Edinburgh. Calvert must have engraved this illustration some 15 months after. Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library

Catalogue cover of the 1867 Adelaide Exhibition staged for the visit of HRH Duke of Edinburgh, from which the Duke purchased the five piece suite. Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library



Royal Warrant to J M Wendt

Cast iron signage of Royal Warrant placed over J M Wendt's shop door

Letterhead of J M Wendt with Royal Warrant, 1872

The collection of gold and silversmiths' work was extremely elaborate and beautiful, and the caskets in which the various addresses had been presented to the Prince attracted so much notice that it became necessary to fence the cases round with a strong barricade to prevent the crowd from overturning the tables on which they stood. Some centrepieces and corner ornaments of plated [sic] silver manufactured by Mr. J. M. Wendt, pleased His Royal Highness so much that he purchased them, in order to take them to England with him.⁴

This statement is of great interest for, as shown, Wendt exhibited and sold an identical pair of tazzas to McLean at the Dunedin Exhibition in 1865. Up until now I thought that this pair had been exhibited at Melbourne in 1866 with the addition of another pair. However, since they were purchased by the Duke of Edinburgh and left the country this cannot be the case.

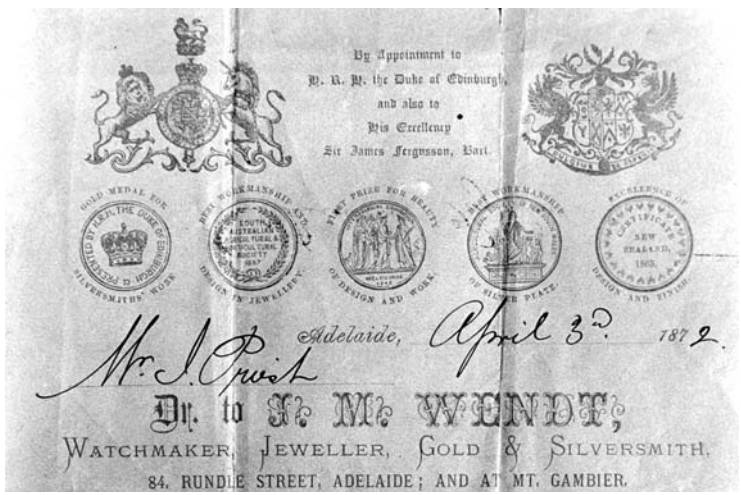
The Duke of Edinburgh's suite is described in an entry in the *South Australian Advertiser* of 16 November 1867:

We are informed that H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh has purchased the handsome epergne shown at the Exhibition by Mr. J.M. Wendt, together with a set of four tazzas to match the epergne. Such silver work as is shown in these articles will reflect very great credit on the manufacturers and on the colony generally.

The sale to the Duke of Edinburgh was a considerable coup for Wendt, who on the receipt of the letter giving him the Royal Warrant caused a cast iron copy of the Duke's arms to be erected over the entrance to his shop to show his pride in the appointment. In 1865, as shown by his letterhead, he was now the leading silversmith in Adelaide for he still had the skills of Schomburgk to call upon for the creation of important works.

The second edition of the catalogue⁵ of the Duke's treasures collected on his travels on HMS *Galatea* between 1867 and 1871, held at the South Kensington Museum, describes the suite purchased from Wendt at the Agricultural and Horticultural Society Exhibition as:

Items 27-31 S. Australia – Five epergnes one



large & four smaller of cut glass, mounted on unfrosted silver, with representation of the aborigines & fauna of the Colony.

The Dunedin candelabra epergne was purchased from the Wendt family in South Australia in 1989 and sold it to a client. I then repurchased it, to own it for a second time, again, selling it privately. During a recent visit to New Zealand I discovered and purchased the pair of tazzas given to George McLean, still in the same family and suitably inscribed. As a result I have been making considerable endeavours to repurchase the candelabra so as to reunite the Dunedin Suite for the first time since 1865. It represents the finest and probably the only suite of Australian silver centrepieces produced by European craftsman for exhibition purposes known to survive.

The suite sold to the Duke of Edinburgh was taken by him to his family Seat of Gotha on becoming Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 1901.⁶ Its most likely fate was to have been melted, being held behind the Iron Curtain following World War II.

Some years ago I visited the Castle at Gotha and there was no evidence of its existence, all that remained of the Australian objects given to the Duke of Edinburgh were presentation items formerly mounted in gold. The Communists had stripped all the items I saw of their gold fittings and melted them. Such a fate doubtless awaited the five silver centrepieces purchased by the Duke in South Australia in 1867 from Joachim Matthias Wendt, a German immigrant silversmith.



The Dunedin Candelabra Epergne, described in the *Reports and Awards of the Dunedin Industrial Exhibition* 'Class XXXIII Works in Precious Metals. M. Wendt, Adelaide, Manu, Silver Epergne, Inkstand, Claret Jug, and Tazzas of Colonial manufacture. The general design, modelling, and executive of the figures in these exhibits are excellent, and display a skill in modelling in metal after nature, far superior to anything else in the Exhibition, excepting foreign productions, and approaching closely even to them. They are interesting on account of the objects represented being characteristic of Australia, and most of them peculiar to it. The silver-mounted Emu's Eggs and Malachite Brooches, though not so elaborate as the other pieces, are good specimens of workmanship.' Photo J B Hawkins Australian Silver Reference Library

NOTES

1. G L Fischer, Lazar, John (1801-1879), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 2, Melbourne University Press, 1967, pp. 98-99
2. David Scott Mitchell Collection, Library of NSW, Sydney, A 56-A61, A651
3. G.H. Schofield, *A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington. George McLean was Chairman of the Colonial Bank of New Zealand for 18 years and negotiated the sale of the business to the Bank of New Zealand achieving very favourable terms for the shareholders (1895), and Chairman of the Union Steam Ship Co until resigning in 1907. He was knighted in 1909 and was a prominent figure on the turf, President of the Dunedin Jockey Club for 30 years.
4. J D Woods, *Narrative of a Visit of H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh to South Australia, Adelaide, 1868*, p. 50
5. *A Guide to the Works of Art and Sciences collected by Captain His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh K.G. during his five years' cruise around the world in H.M.S. Galatea (1867-1871) and lent for exhibition in the South Kensington Museum, February 1872*, third edition with extra plates, published by John Strangeways, London. This is the only illustrated version of the catalogue. Only three of the 50 pages are devoted to Australian artefacts. Australia had one dedicated showcase out of 49 for royal gifts. The only comment relating to silver is 'However, the Australian silversmiths are not far behind their brethren of the Mother Country and all are, it is to be hoped, gradually becoming alive to the true principles of art.'
6. J B Hawkins, 'Illuminated Addresses Presented to His Royal Highness, Prince Alfred at Schloss, Friedenstein, Gotha,' *Australiana*, November 1999