

The First Nations, First Settlers and the First McLeans in Strathalbyn

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Donald McLean and his family migrated from Scotland in 1837. They arrived in Adelaide just a year after the colony had been founded. Donald established a small farm near Adelaide for three or four years. In 1842 he settled in the new town of Strathalbyn where he was one of the first farmers.

When Donald came to the colony, it has been estimated¹ that there were between 10,000 and 20,000 aboriginal people in South Australia. They were not counted in the census in 1841. Strathalbyn was on the edge of the territories of two indigenous peoples – the Peramangk to the north numbering at least 1200², and the Ngarrindjeri to the south with 6000³ before colonization. These populations were quickly decimated by diseases and dispossession. The Wikipedia entries for these two groups have maps and descriptions of their culture and family life.

Ivan-Tiwu Copley wrote *“Family records show that the early contact between the Peramangk and the settlers was mainly peaceful. The Peramangk helped the settlers by teaching them to catch possums and find edible plants. They also provided shelter and possum skins for clothing. By the mid 1840s conflict had begun as settlers’ sheep crowded the watering holes and grazed on traditional lands impacting on the Peramangk people’s complex cultural system. They were no longer able to move freely between different areas for food-gathering and ceremonial purposes. By the late 1850s many families were moved to Aboriginal missions set up by Lutheran Church and government organisations.”*⁴



Strathalbyn



Around Strathalbyn, the significant indigenous presence is indicated in the following quote. *“Giles Flat was at one time a great camping place for the blacks who came from the Bluff at Encounter Bay, but it is at the centre of what is now the town of Strathalbyn near the old cemetery that the great gatherings of the natives took place. Once a year as many as 100 Aboriginals camped at the rear of the Terminus Hotel then they wended their way to the annual rendezvous in Adelaide”*⁵. The photo on the left⁶ is an encampment near Strathalbyn, and the photo on the right⁷ shows a humpy in the bottom right corner - with the Post Office and Argus House in the background. These photos⁸ were taken more than two decades after Donald settled there.



- 1 10,000 to 20,000 Aboriginal people in SA: *“Bound for South Australia”* by the History Trust of South Australia. <https://boundforsouthaustralia.history.sa.gov.au/historical-background/aboriginal-inhabitants.html>
- 2 1200 Peramangk people: <https://www.visitadelaidehills.com.au/peramangk> - article by Ivan-Tiwu Copley
- 3 6000 Ngarrindjeri people: Wikipedia
- 4 Contact with settlers: <https://www.visitadelaidehills.com.au/peramangk>
- 5 Aboriginal camps in Strathalbyn: Nancy Gemmell, *“Old Strathalbyn and Its People”*, page 21, quoting JW Elliot writing in 1917
- 6 Page 21 - *ibid* – Nancy Gemmell
- 7 Page 38 – *ibid* – Nancy Gemmell

The McLeans and local Aboriginal people

There are many stories of the McLeans' interactions with aboriginal people. These are glimpses of the realities and attitudes of the time.

Here are anecdotes about Donald, three of his children, four of his grandchildren, and a son-on-law.

Donald McLean

There is no record of contacts that Donald, or his wife, Christina, experienced with the Aboriginal people, however he had a tussle with authorities over some land that was designated as an Aboriginal reserve. This is detailed in Appendices A & B.

In 1842 Donald McLean took up the lease of an Aboriginal Reserve 2031A. This was 54 acres leased at one pound per acre for seven years from 1st Jan 1842. He started work on the land a few months before the lease had been signed. In December of that year Donald wrote that he intended to give up possession and also stated that, *"I have fenced a greater portion of the land to the amount of 64 pounds adjoining the public road and have also cleared away the greater part of the scrub and grubbed a great quantity of trees. The expense of the fence being for a substantial stringy bark fence, 16 pounds and 10 shillings and the expense of the clearing and grubbing 14 pounds and 5 shillings."*⁹ He thought he should be able to offset these costs against the rent which had become overdue.

Dr Matthew Morehouse, who had been appointed the Protector of Aborigines in 1839, inspected the site about a week later and reported that he *"found from measurements that the quantity of fencing the north side, the east side joins his private property is not fenced, whilst the south and west boundaries have been fenced by the proprietors of the adjoining sections."* A drawing was attached. He continued, *"it is completely cleared of all e trees, thus it would in consequence be improved much in value, but I don't think it could be leased again at one pound per acre, if the present lessee is permitted to give it up. Mr McLean says that the lease was never executed as the required security could not be given."* So, Dr Morehouse was generally acknowledging what work Donald had done but was not agreeing about offsetting the costs of this work.

Amazingly, within a few days, Governor George Gray, in his own handwriting, took the matter further by stating, *"While I feel the desire to assist Mr McLean, I do not think that the Government can with propriety do more than allow him to throw up the lease for the 23rd December, the date of his letter and then lease land can again be put up for auction. Mr McLean can then again become a tenant of the government if he chooses to bid higher than anyone else."* The Governor then went on to warn public servants to lift their game: *"In future no tenant nor person must be allowed to enter into possession of Government property until all the documents connected with his tenancy of the said property have been clearly executed"*¹⁰.

Comments

- It is not known why this particular piece of land was designated as an Aboriginal reserve, and there are no indications that it was ever used as such.
- In this interchange, it is significant that Dr Matthew Morehouse and Governor George Gray, as people with such demanding responsibilities across the whole colony, would have got so personally and quickly involved in this little piece of land. We are left wondering why they gave it such priority. This is an intriguing peek into the workings of the governing of this new colony. George Gray, attended to details amongst what must have been an overwhelming range of duties. He was only 29 years old and had taken up his position in May 1841, the 5th year of the colony. He was the third Governor within a few years. It is said that he found the colony in financial straits but, by exercising strict economy, he restored stability¹¹. This example, of how he dealt with this little matter of 54 acres at a time when huge acreages were being opened up across the colony, is indicative of his skills.

8 [Photography was not yet available in the 1840s when Donald was settling in Strathalbyn.](#)

9 [Appendices A & B of this document.](#)

10 [Page 15 - BRB & appendix B](#)

11 [Page 15 – ibid BRB & appendix B](#)

- No doubt Donald felt badly done by. He had put considerable sweat and expense into land which he expected would be his, only to be told that his efforts had raised the value of the property and that as he had opted to give it up, if he wanted it back again, he would have to pay a higher price because the land was now more valuable. The Government was not going to reimburse his expenses and he still owed some arrears. The Government was still pursuing Donald for these arrears more than four years later.
- The correspondence reveals some things about Donald. He was either quite literate or had a good ally who assisted him. In either case, he was assertive in pursuing his own interests.

JOHN McLEAN (Donald's son)

- Stripper: *"Getting back to John McLean, when he was troubled by aboriginals taking wheat from his stripper dumps of "cocky" chaff (which is when the stripper in those days had stripped off the wheat heads, then they'd open up the back and dump a heap out). The aborigines were hassling him getting the wheat out of these heaps, so he enticed one male native into the stripper one day to help scrape out the grain when he stopped - and in a rather "mean" mood he slammed down the rear door, locked it and headed off around the paddock, which meant the stripper was throwing all the heads and the dump from the chaff in onto this poor Aboriginal fellow. He did a round of the paddock, back to where the other natives were waiting, opened up the back door of the stripper - the aborigine so imprisoned shot out of the back of the stripper - never to be seen again! After that, John never had any trouble with them taking his wheat"*¹².
- Redcoats: *"John was a member of a group called the "Redcoats" who met at Belvidere, where the main road crosses the River Angas, 5 miles south of Strathalbyn. They were based mainly at Finniss, but met monthly there on Saturday mornings to, and I quote, "solve aboriginal problems" - whatever might be read into that! There weren't many such problems - they would more often play a compassionate role in helping any settlers who had been injured or lost a family member"*¹³.

EDWIN 'Ted' McLEAN (son of John McLean who is a son of Donald - ie Ted was Donald's grandson)

- Leeches: *"Stories of the natives and river leeches were told to us by Ted McLean, who could remember natives taking leeches to Adelaide probably about 1880-1890. Doctors in Adelaide would buy them for 2/- each and use them to treat cancerous type problems, ulcers, etc. Dad said they would walk up through Section 2075 (the old "Maplemore" property) with their hands clasped in front of their bodies, carrying a mud pie in which they would have 2 or 3 leeches. Then walk all the way to Adelaide to deliver them. They would have been caught in the swamps adjoining Lake Alexandrina"*¹⁴
- Windows: *"He [Ted McLean] also used to recall, probably in the very early days that the natives would sneak up to the house at "Waterloo" by night being attracted by a candle burning. Then in their endeavours to look through the window, they would slide their noses up the glass in the window, making a weird shrieking noise!"*¹⁵

SYD WAKEFIELD (Syd was not a relative, but the story is told by Alf McLean who was the son of Ted McLean who was the son of John McLean - ie Alf was Donald's great-grandson)

- Money: *"Syd Wakefield of Belvidere used to tell how his grandfather who lived at Bugle Ranges, would come down to the mouth of the Bremer River, "the Canal" in Lake Alexandrina, when his wheat was ripe for a wagon load of natives men, women and children. He would take them back to Bugle Ranges to cut and cart the crop - using a sickle or a scythe. This would have been in the 1850's before grain strippers were introduced. In payment they insisted on silver money, plus a wagon load of canoe bark which they would cut from the big red gums in the hills. When he took them home, the wagon carried the bark and all the natives walked behind. When he reached the lake he would give the chief native the silver money. The chief would then throw the money into the air, and they would all scramble for it. Mr Wakefield said a lot*

12 This was written by John McLean's grandson, Alf McLean whose father was John's son, Ted McLean - page 266 in BRB - and also page 5 in John McLean's biography (5054) that is attached to his profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

13 Ibid - Page 266, BRB

14 Ibid - page 268 in BRB - and page 6 in the John McLean's biography (5045)

15 Ibid - page 268 in BRB - and page 6 in the John McLean's biography (5045)

of it would be thrown along the top of the lake water for the fun of seeing it bounce; while some would keep it for a trip into Milang for as they said "exchange" for tea, sugar, and other needs."¹⁶

ARCHIBALD McLEAN (Donald's son)

- Spearing: *"The land had previously been Morambro Station of 103 square miles, taken up by Mary Oliver who was partnered by Brown who was killed by the blacks and pinned to a log by a spear. When Archie encountered an elderly man named Brown, a cook for the drovers, he was told that in the old days the aboriginals were very treacherous and required a lot of watching"*¹⁷.

ANN JEFFREYS, nee McLEAN (Donald's daughter)

- Kindness: *"The deceased was a great philanthropist and of her it may be truly said "her right hand did not know what her left hand gave away". She was a genial and bonny Scotch woman beloved by whom all who came in contact with her and was ever fond of giving her experiences of the early days in the south. especially when the blacks were numerous and in tribal fights of no uncommon occurrence"*¹⁸.

MARGARET MOTT, nee McDONALD (daughter of Donald's daughter, Rachel - ie Margaret was Donald's grand-daughter)

- Helpers: *"Maggie's life was difficult during her early married years: long distances travelled in jolting carts over unmade roads; babies born mostly without medical aid, far from the help of relatives. It is said that at one time her helpers were local Aboriginal women"*¹⁹.

ELIZABETH Ann JOHNSTON, nee McLEAN (daughter of Hugh the younger who was Donald's son – ie Donald's grand-daughter)

- Fear: *"Elizabeth found her life frightening amongst primitive aborigines and she feared to venture out of doors, so the natives advised Matthew to kill her, as they believed that she was sulky and 'no good'. At Mt Malcolm their residence adjoined the shop and the natives were continually robbing them of liquor and butter grease paper which they used to rub grease into their hair with red clay which hardened and rattled and gave them great pleasure. Her fear of the blacks was not surprising as they were primitive & held their corroborees nearby & dispensed their justice that often ended in the death of the accused. When Elizabeth gave her wedding gown to one of the young women as it no longer fitted her, she had to witness other gins in their jealousy, tear it to shreds"*²⁰.

CHARLES STUART McDONALD (son of Rachel who was Donald's daughter – ie Donald's grandson)

- Spearing: Charles's father, Ewen, was *"the first man to take sheep overland from Sydney to Adelaide in 1839. The trip, which took 12 months to accomplish, was fraught with continual danger from the blacks and trouble crossing the rivers. On this occasion several men were speared to death and their drays looted, which necessitated the party subsisting on fresh mutton, supplemented by such game as could be shot for six weeks."*²¹

EWEN McDONALD (husband of Rachel McLean who was Donald's daughter)

- Gibby: *"When Grandfather [Ewen McDonald] lived in South Australia he had a favourite horse called Toby, and he rode it to Adelaide once to complain about the Aboriginals. The Aboriginals used to say about Grandfather: "Ewen, he all jaw like a sheep's head!". What they meant we don't know. When Grandfather was on the farm at Finniss he had an old shepherd, Gibby McNichol, working for him. If the blacks came worrying the sheep Gibby would fire a gun as a signal and Grandfather would gallop to his*

16 Ibid - page 268 in BRB - and page 6 in the John McLean's biography (5045)

17 Ibid - page 403 in BRB - and Archibald McLean's biography (5086) that is attached to his profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

18 Ibid – page 486 in BRB - and Elizabeth Ann McLean's biography (5114) that is attached to her profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

19 Ibid - page 115 in Rachel's chapter in BRB - and Margaret McDonald's biography (5146) that is attached to her profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

20 Ibid - page 558 in BRB - and Elizabeth Ann McLean's biography (5218) that is attached to her profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

21 Ibid - page 157 in Rachel McLean's chapter in BRB – and Charles Stuart McDonald's biography (5161) that is attached to his profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

help. Once old Gibby went to the blacks' camp and asked a lubra whether he could buy a fish, and he would pay her in the morning. She replied: "You pay 'em in the morning, you have fish in the morning"²²

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References

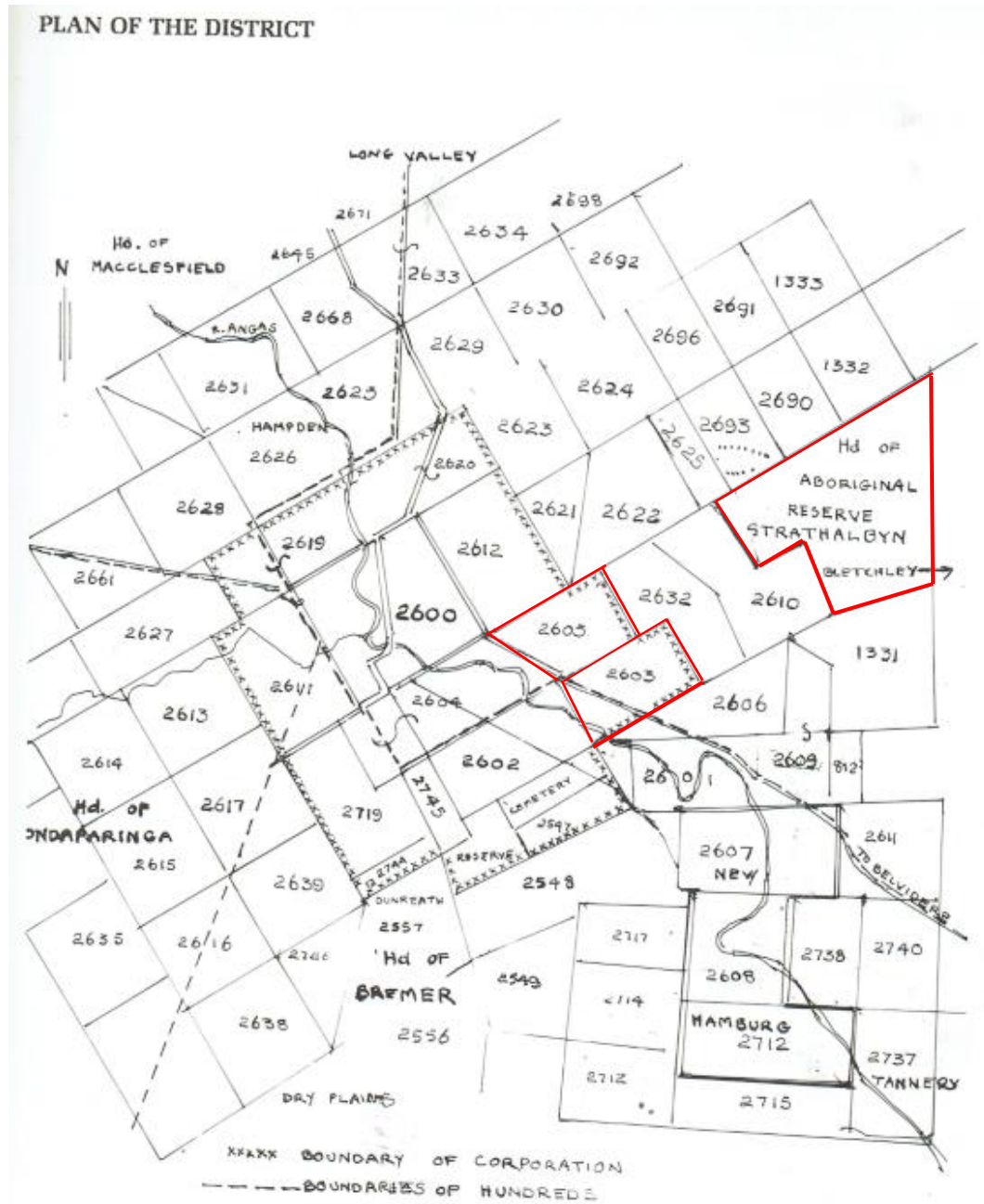
- Donald & Christina McLean Genealogical Council (Inc), (1995) *History of Donald & Christina McLean & Their Descendants*, ISBN 0646242318
- Gemmell, Nancy, (1984) *Old Strathalbyn and Its People, 1839-1939*", ISBN 0909378355, National Trust of South Australia

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22 Ibid - page 46 in Rachel McLean's chapter in BRB – and Rachel's biography (5121) that is attached to her profile in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com

Appendix A

Source:- Nancy Gemmell – “Old Strathalbyn”, p51



I drew this plan from a combination of old damaged ones now in the S.A. Archives and an earlier map which shows the sections before they were lost under Burnside and the later Burnside blocks.

Source: pages 13 to 14 of BRB “Donald & Christina McLean and Their Descendants”

From 1842 to 1846 Donald McLean was the lessee of an Aboriginal Reserve. He made a claim for fencing and grubbing in 1842 but was in arrears for rent for the Reserve 1842-43 so was denied.

The correspondence of Donald concerning land leases gave his address as "Duskey Farm" undoubtedly poor spelling of the Duiskie or Duisy Estate of Argyllshire from whence the family emigrated. Whether this applied to the new property at Strathalbyn from 1841 or the one at Hilton, has not been ascertained. According to the 1841 Census they were definitely already at Strathlbyn.

Correspondence from Mortlock Library:

Aboriginal Reserve 2031 A. - 54 acres Donald McLean - annual rental at 54 pounds (one pound per acre) \$108 - for a term of 7 years from January 1st 1842. (Donald signed his name variously as - McLane - MacLean - McLean - McClean.) Rent paid to September 30th/1842. Recorded by Robert Gouger, Colonial Treasurer. There had been some months occupation before the date when the lease commenced for which a quarters rent had been paid in advance - thus a whole years rent would be paid on 30/9/1842 and a further quarters due on 1/1/1843.

Ref. CSOK 1842/128: - to Donald McLean.

Sir,

The Colonial Treasurer has reported that you have not paid the whole amount of the half years rent due by you on the first of July last, on the following Aboriginal Reserve let to you - No. 2031 District A.. The Advocate General has also reported that you have not yet executed the lease of the same which was notified in the Gazette for the period of two months, as being ready for executor and delivery at the Crown Solicitor's Office in Rundle Street. His Excellency the Governor, has accordingly directed me to request that you will lose no further time in executing the lease and paying the balance of rent due. I am at the same time to acquaint you that another Quarters rent will fall due on the first of next month.

I am etc. J. A. Jackson. 27th September 1842.

Ref. CSOP/1842/212: Dated 19/11/1842. To Donald McLean.

Sir,

In reference to my letter of 27th September last, I now beg to inform you that the Colonial Treasurer and Collector of Internal Revenue has reported that the sum of 27 pounds (\$54) due by you on September last (30th) is six months in arrears on the Aboriginal Reserve let to you, and is as yet unpaid, and to express the hope of his Excellency the Governor that you will see the necessity of Forthwith paying the same to that office,

I am etc. J. A. Jackson.

Ref. 451/1842: - To the Resident Commissioner of Lands in the Province of South Australia. Dated 23/12/1842.

Your Excellency,

I beg leave most respectfully to intimate my intention of giving up the possession of the 54 acres of the Aboriginal Reserve which I now rent under your Excellency. And also to state that I have fenced a greater portion of the land to the amount of 64 pounds (\$128) adjoining the public road and have also cleared away the greater part of the scrub and grubbed a great quantity of trees. The expense of the fence being for a substantial stringy bark fence, 16 pounds 10 shillings (\$33) and the expense of the clearing and grubbing 14 pounds 5 shillings (\$28.50). I have therefore most respectfully to request that your Excellency will take my statement into your kind consideration and grant me any relief your Excellency may think proper.

I have the honour to be your Excellency's Obedient Servant,
DONALD McLEAN - Dusky Farm.

Note the spelling of "Duisky" varied considerably.

Ref. CSC 1061/42: To A. M. Mundy Esq. Private Secretary - dated Jan. 5th 1843. Aboriginal Location.

Sir,

I have the honour to inform his Excellency the Governor that I yesterday visited the aboriginal Reserve mentioned in Mr McLean's Memorial and found from measurements that the quantity of fencing as stated by Mr McLean is correct but the rate of 5 pounds (\$10) per road at which he has calculated it, is decidedly higher than the current price for a three railed fence. Mr McLean has only fenced the north side, the east side joins his private property and is not fenced, whilst the south and west boundaries have been fenced by the proprietors of the adjoining sections as shown in the annexed diagram. (A drawing was alongside.) It is completely cleared from trees, thus it would in consequence be improved much in value, but I don't think it could be leased again at one pound (\$2) per acre, if the present lessee be permitted to give it up. Mr McLean says that the lease was never executed as the required security could not be given.

I have the honour to be Sir, your obedient servant,
J. Morehouse, Protector of Aborigines.

Ref. CSC 1061/42:
Memorandum from Governor George Gray - dated Jan. 7th 1843.

Mr Jackson,

While I feel the desire to assist Mr McLean, I do not think that the Government can with propriety do more than allow him to throw up the lease from the 23rd December, the date of his letter and then the lease land can again be put up for auction. Mr McLean can then again become a tenant of the Government, if he chooses to bid higher than anyone else. In the future no tenant nor person must be allowed to enter into possession of Government property until all the documents connected with his tenancy of the said property have been clearly executed.

G. Gray.

George Gray was the 3rd Governor of South Australia from 15/5/1841. His handwriting is most difficult to decipher. He was only aged 29 when he took office. He had found the Colony in financial straits but by exercising strict economy he restored stability.

Note: Donald did not get away with his proposal for remuneration as the last letter and the next directly show. In this Duisky is incorrectly "Dunshey" and section No. 50 is proof of the Hilton farm being so named.

Ref. 501/1842/308:
To Mr Donald McLean, Dunshey Farm - No. 50. Dated Jan 9th 1843.

Sir,

With reference to your letter of the 23rd ultimo I am directed by his Excellency to inform you that with every desire to assist you, he does not think that the Government can with propriety do more than allow you to throw up the lease of Aboriginal Reserve of 54 acres (No. 2031) District A. as from the 31st December last, and then to have the section again let by public auction, when, if you chance again to become the tenant of the Government, you would the opportunity of becoming such by bidding higher than any other person.

I am, etc. J. A. Jackson. (Colonial Secretary).

January 14th 1843 - the Colonial Secretary J. A. Jackson received the list and which he passed on to the Advocate General's Office of "unexecuted Aboriginal Reserves". This included that of Donald McLean. He allowed the lease to lapse, but on May 9th still owed 13 pounds 10 shillings (\$27) in rent and headed the list sent to Robert Gouger, the Colonial Treasurer. On June 30th Donald had still not paid up together with 13 others whose names are well known in the early history of South Australia.

Ref. CSOM/1846/49:
 Nothing further appears concerning Donald's lease until 12/9/1846.
 The handwritten copy from the Government Letter Book has not photocopied clearly so may not be exact. The letter book kept handwritten duplicates.

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your memorandum of the 27th ultimo, transmitting to me statement of the returns of rent due to the Local Government by the indebted lessees of the Aboriginal Reserves, and in reply I am directed to answer you with the following information, thereon, which, through some misdirection in this office was not supplied as it might be, to name mine as (in?) an earlier record.

Donald McLean.

The office of the Auditor General noted:- The consequence of an application made by the individual for permission to give up the lease of Section no 2031 and was allowed to be 31st December 1842.

The rather obscure wording of Donald's letter, if correct, appears to be an objection to being still billed for part rental of the 54 acres he had ceased to lease nearly 4 years earlier.

Ref. CSO/439/1846:
Approved applications by the Commissioner of Crown Lands 17/4/1846.

Donald and Allan McLean - Mundoo Island, bounded on all sides by Lake Victoria (the original name of Lake Alexandrina) containing more or less one square mile. Lease no 122. Repeated on 28/6/1847.