Robert Hoddle

Surveyor General Victoria, 1851 – 1853

From 1837, Robert Hoddle was Officer-in-Charge of the Port Phillip Survey Department and became the first Surveyor General of Victoria in 1851. He is a central figure in the history of surveying, cartography and geography in Victoria.

Hoddle was born on 21 April 1794 at St James, Westminster, London. He was accepted at the age of 15 as a cadet in the Corps of Royal Military Surveyors and Draftsmen. After spending a year in South Africa and with a letter of introduction from the Governor of Cape Town, he boarded the brig William Penn on 24 April 1823 bound for Van Diemen's Land.

In New South Wales he rose through the ranks from temporary assistant surveyor in September 1823 to eventually become senior surveyor in October 1828. During this time he was Acting Deputy Surveyor-General for a brief period. In February 1837, he accompanied Sir Richard Bourke, then Governor of New South Wales, to the newly established settlement at Port Phillip.

The period from 1837 to 1851 saw much survey work done by Hoddle and his group. It was a period of huge expansion in terms of population and land surveyed for orderly use. Large goldfields were discovered in areas such as Ballarat, Mount Alexander and Bendigo during this period. The gold rush was underway and people came to Victoria's diggings from New South Wales, South Australia and more distant places by sea.

The achievement of Hoddle and other government surveyors during this period was great. Little was known of the geography of Victoria before 1836 yet within this period, among other achievements, they had been able to fix the positions of principal mountain ranges and peaks, locate lakes and trace most major rivers, mark the boundary between Victoria and South Australia and lay down the embryo designs of over a hundred settlements.

Robert Hoddle was the most notable of the government surveyors. He is remembered for his significant role in the laying out of the design of the central business district of the City of Melbourne. Hoddle gave Melbourne's citizens a unique well-planned city with wide major streets and narrow secondary streets. His plan allowed for the impressive boulevards and many public parks that are a feature of Melbourne today. Hoddle is also remembered for his input into Arrowsmith's Map of the Province of Victoria.

Hoddle died on 24 October 1881 at the age of 87. Hoddle's first wife was Mary Staton who he married in Surrey in November 1818; they had one daughter.
Following Mary's death in 1862 he married, Fanny Agnes, the 18-year-old daughter of Captain Benjamin Baxter in July 1863 and they had three daughters and one son. The Hoddle family lived in a house that he built in 1842 on the corner of Bourke and Spencer Streets and this is where he spent his long years of retirement.

The Chronicles of Early Melbourne quotes Surveyor Robert Hoddle: "When I marked out Melbourne in 1837, I proposed that all the streets should be ninety-nine feet wide. Sir Richard Bourke suggested the lanes as mews or approaches to the stables and out-buildings of the main streets of buildings. I staked the main streets ninety-nine feet wide, and after having done so, I was ordered by the Governor to make them sixty-six feet wide; but upon my urging the Governor, and convincing him that wide streets were advantageous on the score of health, and convenience to the future city of Victoria, he consented to let me have my will. I therefore gave up my objection to the narrow lanes thirty-three feet wide, which have unfortunately become streets, and many expensive buildings have been erected thereon. Had a greater number of allotments been brought to public auction at first, houses in the broad streets would have been built in preference... In 1837, after marking the streets, Sir Richard Bourke came early one morning into my tent and gave me the list of the names of the streets."

The picture of Hoddle featured above resides in Hoddle House, corner of Elizabeth and Little Collins streets. The better known portrait in oils by an unknown artist resides in the State Library of Victoria. A better preserved portrait, painted by his daughter Agnes (later Mrs Grant McDonald) is owned by her daughter, Miss Constance Hoddle-Wrigley, of Paynesville, Victoria.

The field books along with Hoddle's diary are on display at the Melbourne Museum.

References and Further Reading