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The massacre of the survivors of the shipwrecked *Maria* off the South Australian coast in 1840 is one of South Australia’s founding stories, mythologised in later nineteenth century accounts as a meaningless act by cowardly and bloodthirsty natives. As Robert Foster, Rick Hosking and Amanda Nettelbeck showed in their 2002 book *Fatal Collisions*, that is not how it was seen at the time. And now, from Beth Duncan’s new book *Mary Thomas: Founding Mother* we can see how the massacre became an occasion not only for an argument over the rights of Aborigines to the same protections under British law as the settlers, but a struggle for the freedom of the press.

Mary Thomas’s husband Robert was a partner with George Stevenson in R. Thomas and Co., publisher of the *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register*. Stevenson was editor, with full control of the content, while Thomas was the printer. Before they left London, Thomas was appointed Government Printer and the partners were awarded the government printing contract for the life of their partnership. The first issue of the paper came out in London on 18 June 1836, and on 2 July the Thomas family – Mary, Robert and four of their five children – set sail on the *Africaine* for South Australia.

At the Proclamation ceremony on 28 December 1836, Governor Hindmarsh read out the following words, believed to have been written by Stevenson:

> It is also, at this time especially, my duty to apprize the Colonists of my resolution, to take every lawful means for extending the same protection to the NATIVE POPULATION as to the rest of His Majesty’s Subjects, and of my
firm determination to punish with exemplary severity all acts of violence or injustice which may in any manner be practised or attempted against the natives, who are to be considered as much under the safeguard of the law as the Colonists themselves, and equally entitled to the privileges of British Subjects.

Stevenson was, inter alia, the first Protector of Aborigines in the colony, and took his duties seriously, teaching the first young man he met how to use a knife and fork, and praising the race as ‘many degrees above the savage.’ Like other settlers, of course, he had no doubt that his was a superior civilization, and that ‘because of the Aborigines’ nomadic ways, possession could be taken of their land “without doing them the smallest injury”.

Stevenson, as the governor’s private secretary and also secretary to the Executive Council, had considerable influence with Hindmarsh and regretted his recall in June 1838. His replacement, Governor George Gawler, arrived in Adelaide in October 1838. By the middle of 1839 tensions between the settlers and the Aborigines over land and stock came to a head when two white shepherds were killed, and two Aboriginal men were tried and hanged for their murder.

A year later the news of the massacre broke.

In its first August issue, the Register, under the headline ‘Suspected Shipwreck, and Murder by the Natives’, published a report from the Encounter Bay police station. It advised that, about a week earlier, local Aborigines had seen members of a neighbouring tribe, the Milmenrura (Big Murray tribe), wearing bloodstained European clothing and were told that 10 white men, five white women and some children had been killed at a site about two days sail down the Coorong.
It was soon established that the ship in question was the brig *Maria*, bound for Hobart, which had sailed from Port Adelaide. The Commissioner of Police was dispatched with a mounted party. He found the wreck, and hanged two Aboriginal men. Stevenson, in the *Register* (now separated from the *Gazette*), urged immediate publication of ‘the evidence itself which satisfied Major O’Halloran of the actual criminality of these individuals’. Public opinion was ‘divided and heated’, but Stevenson continued to voice his ‘distinct and earnest protest against the right of the Colonial Government of South Australia to authorize the summary putting to death of any human being save under circumstances recognized and specially defined by the law of England, and the constitution of the British Empire.’

Gawler did not attempt to censor the newspaper directly, but on 17 September he advised that he would ‘remove the government printing, apart from the publication of the [government] *Gazette* and the printing of the acts of council, from the firm on 1 January 1841.’ Veiled threats to take government business away from R. Thomas and Co. had begun more than a year before, ‘whenever the *Register* opposed aspects of Gawler’s administration’. Robert Thomas protested that this contravened the firm’s agreement with the SA commissioners and the Colonial Office, to no avail. Stevenson continued to attack Gawler’s handling of the events following the massacre, and Gawler retaliated by taking away more work from the firm. In a public statement in the *Register* on 4 November 1840, R. Thomas and Co. wrote:

> His Excellency erroneously assumes that our political opinions were to be subject to those of the Colonial Government … Neither as a firm nor individually have we ever acknowledged the alternative of being … obliged to give venal support to His Excellency … If His Excellency has not already discovered, he soon will discover, that no support of a hack newspaper writer
— that no political advocacy which can be purchased — no subversion of the

Press — is worth a straw.

Gawler immediately removed all printing work from the firm. Nothing remained now but for Robert Thomas to make the expensive journey to London to seek redress. While he was away, Gawler was recalled and replaced by George Grey. In January 1842 Grey restored the contract for the printing of the Gazette to the firm, but it was not enough to save the partners from bankruptcy later that same year, caused partly by the loss of government business and partly by the desperate financial state of the colony at the time.

Meanwhile, missionary Dr Richard Penny had encountered members of the Milmenrura and heard their side of the story:

They had brought the whole people [the survivors] up a long way, showed them water; fished and carried their children for them. … When they came to this point, they could not take them any farther as their country ends there and the piccaninny Murray begins. Then they claimed some clothes and blankets for their trouble, but the white people refused to give them any, yet said that if they took them to Adelaide they should have plenty. This they could not do, so they began to help themselves, and, this being resisted, ended in the murder of the whole. The white men did fight for some time, but they broke their arms with waddies and speared them. They were also jealous of the next tribe into whose territory they would have passed, and who, being in the habit of visiting Adelaide, could have taken them up and obtained the reward promised to them.

Stevenson claimed that these revelations vindicated the Register’s position: ‘The unfortunate passengers of the Maria were not murdered in cold blood, but in an affray
evidently provoked by the resistance and ungrateful conduct of the white party.’

Nobody, except perhaps the rival printers, emerged unscathed from this debacle. Stevenson’s record as a valiant defender of freedom is somewhat tarnished by his subsequent attack on Robert Thomas for ‘irregularity of books kept … and consequent losses in bad debts.’ Stevenson died in 1856, Thomas in 1860, without reconciling their differences. And the small measure of interracial understanding represented by Penny’s explanation was soon subsumed in essentialist myths of savagery and treachery.

*Mary Thomas: Founding Mother* by Beth Duncan is published by Wakefield Press.