

LN 07/11/22

Robert Tod and Parnell: the naming of a suburb

By Margaret
Edgumbe

Other friends and promoters of the cause, like Mr Tod, a merchant at Damascus, Mr. Groves of Baghdad and his associates Messrs Parnell, Cronin and Newman, and the numerous representatives of the different missionary societies, contributed to the wide dispersion of the sacred books.

William Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Vol. II, p.18.

Robert Tod, the fiery, argumentative Scottish merchant, met John Vesey Parnell, the gentle, unworldly, would-be missionary, in 1832, at Beirut on the coast of Syria. Nine years later in Auckland, Tod chose the name of Parnell for his subdivision above Mechanics Bay, and thus created a mystery which puzzled local historians for the next 170 years. Which member of the distinguished Parnell family had he decided to honour in this way? This article will attempt to provide the answer and set the record straight.

THE GLASWEGIAN

Some time in the late 1820s Robert Tod left his comfortable middle-class life in Glasgow and went to Egypt, hoping to make his fortune as a 'merchant, shipbroker and commission agent'. His father, also named Robert Tod, 'merchant in Glasgow', had died unexpectedly in 1826 at the age of 55. As his eldest son, then aged 28 and unmarried, Robert had to become, as his mother put it, 'the faithful guardian of our family' – three unmarried sisters and three brothers still of school age. His solution to the problem of the brothers was to bring the younger ones out to Egypt and to train them as future partners. Alexander joined him first, followed later by Patrick, and so the firm of Messrs Tod Bros & Co. came into being.

ALEXANDRIA C. 1828-1831

The Tod brothers made their base at the port of Alexandria, where they lived among the large community of 'Franks' (foreign merchants and military personnel involved in the modernisation of the Egyptian state). The Turkish governor, the legendary Mehmet Ali Pasha, encouraged and protected his Franks, and enforced some degree of religious tolerance, but many Europeans still found it wisest to adopt local costume when mixing with the public. Robert Tod, however, always refused to disguise the fact that he was British, and proud of it.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyan Missionary Society were also moving into the larger Egyptian cities at that time, hoping to make converts amongst the Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Catholic communities. Robert and Alexander were very helpful in overseeing cargoes for the CMS at Cairo and the Wesleyans at Alexandria, sometimes even offering their services free of charge, and in 1829 Robert boasted that he had caused something of a riot by handing out tracts in the courtyard of the Greek Church at Alexandria.

'TODdling after a Commission': drawing of Robert Tod (1798 – 1864), by Samuel Thomas Gill, Adelaide: Penman and Co, 1849. National Library of Australia, NLA PIC S677 nla.pic-an7564012.



As soon as they saw what I was giving away, they fought with each other to get near me and I was obliged to fight my way through them to prevent my clothes being torn to pieces. The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle, September 1829, pp. 426-7.

In July 1831, during a visit to London, Robert met with the committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society and arranged to become their sales agent in the Near East. By way of an incentive he told them that he was planning to set up a branch of his firm in Damascus and outlined many innovative ideas to improve their sales figures – like stalls in the bazaars and signs in the different local languages. Unfortunately, those plans had to be put on hold for another year, until the Egyptian army had gained complete control of Syria and the inland cities could be declared free of bubonic plague.

THE DUBLINER

John Vesey Parnell was the eldest son of Sir Henry Brooke Parnell, a prominent member of the British Parliament who held a number of important cabinet posts during his long career. As the eldest son John was heir to a baronetcy and extensive properties in Queen's County Ireland and therefore had little need to make a career for himself, although he could have gone into politics like his father, the army, or the church like other members of his family. The young Parnell's interests were indeed largely spiritual, but he preferred to avoid the

Margaret Edgcumbe was born in Parnell in 1942 and attended Parnell School 1947 – 1953.

In 1957 she wrote a School Certificate essay which associated the suburb with Charles Stewart Parnell, and has been waiting for an opportunity to rectify the mistake ever since. After retiring from the English Department of the University of Auckland in 2002 she has occupied her time with research into the early history of Parnell.



John Vesey Parnell, 2nd Baron Congleton (1805 – 1883). He succeeded to the title on the death of his father in 1842. Source: Giberne Sieveking, *Memoir and Letters of Francis W. Newman*, 1909.



Anthony Norris Groves (1795 – 1853).
Source: Harriet Groves, *Memoir of the Late Anthony Norris Groves*, 1856.

exclusivity of the main churches and instead became part of a loose network of friends in England and Ireland who met together simply as fellow Christians.

In 1828-9 John Parnell rented a room in Aungier Street, Dublin, where those friends could meet for discussions and the 'breaking of bread'. Dr Edward Cronin, a Catholic convert to Anglicanism, was one of them, and the English dentist Anthony Norris Groves joined them whenever he came to Ireland. On Groves' last visit the discussions were mainly about his plans for a mission to Baghdad following the example set by the original apostles. These three men are usually counted among the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, but there was no formal movement by that name until after 1834 and the proposed mission was completely non-denominational.

THE GROVES MISSION

Parnell was not one of the original party, but he financed the first leg of the journey by leasing a private yacht to take the Groves household as far as St Petersburg. They arrived in Russia in July 1829, and Parnell then returned to England.

Obviously there must have been some interesting conversations on the way, because Parnell returned full of enthusiasm for making his own expedition to Baghdad. His party, which left Ireland for the Mediterranean in September 1830, included the Cronin family – Edward, his mother, sister Nancy, and baby daughter – as well as Francis Newman and John Hamilton, two recent graduates. Parnell was still unmarried, but hoped to find a suitable opportunity to marry Nancy Cronin in France during the journey. That, however, proved impossible once the glitches and delays began to multiply. By 10 January 1831 the party and their voluminous baggage had only just managed to reach Aleppo, and there they stayed for the next 15 months, since the combined effects of 'warfare, pestilence and famine' prevented any caravans from crossing the desert.

While Parnell waited in limbo, Groves spent most of 1831 having his faith severely put to the test as a series of catastrophes struck the city of Baghdad. There was war inside and outside the city. Mrs Groves and her baby daughter died of the plague. The Tigris River flooded, destroying the city walls and thousands of houses. Corpses lay in the streets and floated in the river. Food and water were scarce, and looting was rife. Yet Groves stayed on in the hope that his friends would eventually arrive.

THE MEETING

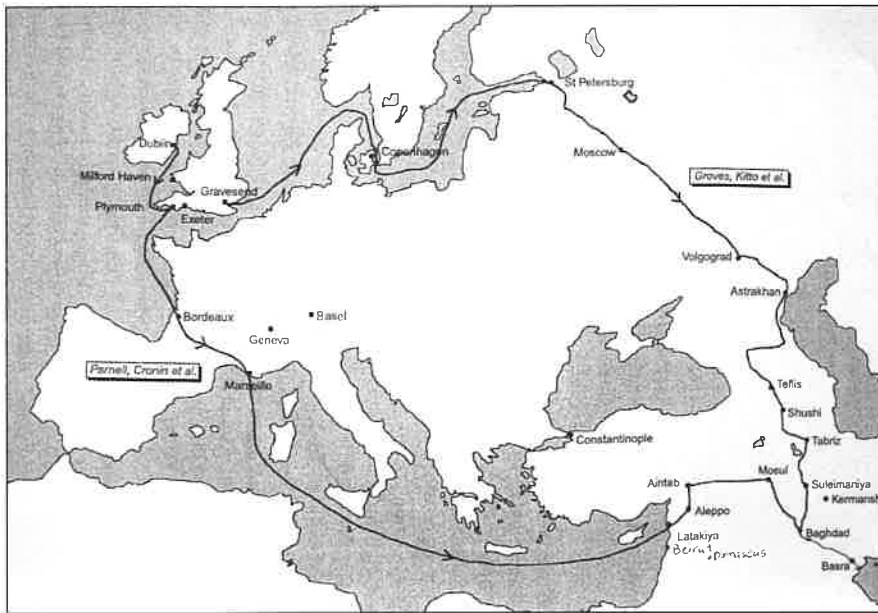
Robert Tod would have been familiar with the accounts of these brave but unlucky men from the usual desert grapevine, and from the missionary journals where his own activities were recorded, often on the very same page. Some time in February or early March 1832 he actually got to meet one of the heroes. In comparison with other famous meetings in the mission field it was not as momentous as the one between Stanley and Livingstone, but afterwards he wrote triumphantly to the Bible Society:

With the concurrence of the American Missionaries ... I handed over to John Parnell Esq, son of Sir Henry Parnell, & Missionary proceeding to join Mr Groves at Baghdad, 15 Arabic Testaments, 14 Persian Testaments, 18 Persian Psalms, 41 Persian Proverbs & 27 Hebrew Bibles.

Letter: R. Tod to Rev. J. Jackson, Damascus 5 August 1832.

He sounds somewhat star-struck, and definitely impressed by Parnell's family connections.

Parnell had left Aleppo to come to Latakia on the coast, in the hope of arranging transport back to England for the ailing and homesick Mr Hamilton. Nancy Parnell, now his wife and pregnant with their first child, had come with



Map: two routes to Baghdad, 1829 and 1830 – 32. Source: Robert Bernard Dann, *Father of Faith Missions: The Life and Times of Anthony Norris Groves*, Paternoster, 2004, p.112.

Dr Edward Cronin (1801 – 1882). Source: Giberne Sieveking, *Memoir and Letters of Francis W. Newman*, 1909

them for the 'change of air', but tragically she died after a miscarriage brought on by a fall from a donkey. Her husband buried her at Latakia in December 1831, farewelled young Hamilton, and then came to Beirut to seek comfort from the American missionaries Isaac Bird and George Whiting.

The visit stretched on for three months, and Parnell was certainly still enjoying their hospitality when Robert and Patrick Tod arrived on 15 February 1832, along with six cases of Biblical translations which had only just escaped shipwreck. It is probable that the introductions would have occurred in the house of one or other of the missionaries.

Once their leader returned to Aleppo in early April, the survivors from Parnell's original party were eventually able to set out for Baghdad, arriving there on 27 June. It seems clear from Newman's letters home that their progress was slowed by an oversupply of books and a lithographic printing press. In his opinion, 'this Bible printing is carried to an absurd extreme'.

IN THE DESERT 1832-4

The Tods reached their destination in Damascus by August 1832, and later opened another branch of the firm in Baghdad, along with a new postal service between Damascus and Bombay. Robert may well have had further personal contact with Parnell and the members of the Groves mission, but it is difficult to tell whether he ever braved the dangers of the journey across the desert. That part of the Baghdad trade seems to have been left to young Patrick. But in April 1833 a very sizeable order of 322 Bible Society translations was despatched to the Groves mission in the care of Erasmus Scott Calman, an independent missionary who had made a great impression on both Parnell and Tod.

Calman had already proved himself very useful in shifting surplus copies of the translations. As a European Jew, baptised in London, he could communicate in a number of languages and blended in easily at the local bazaars. In fact he was so successful at Tod's market stall in Damascus that the authorities threw him into jail on a charge of 'inculcating publicly Books contrary to the Korân'. Robert, in his favourite role as the brave 'Englishman', immediately charged to the rescue and, in his own words, 'proceeded to the place of Justice and in virtue of my European habit (clothes) took him out of their hands'.

But the Baghdad missionaries did not stay together long after their reunion. Groves departed for India in mid-1833, and Cronin and Parnell set out to join him there in late 1834. Calman left Syria for Jerusalem in 1835. Robert

SOURCES

All quotations from Tod's correspondence, unless otherwise stated, are from the Cambridge University Library: Bible Society Archives - GBR/0374/BSAX/1/T.

For a general history of the Plymouth Brethren and the Baghdad Mission see Harold Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren*, London, 1967.

Memoirs and biographies of the main participants are now often available as reprints and e.books. See:

Harriet Groves, *Memoir of the Late Anthony Norris Groves*, 1856.

Henry Groves, 'Not of the World', *Memoir of Lord Congleton*, 1884.

Giberne Sieveking, *Memoir and Letters of Francis W. Newman*, 1909.

For short accounts of the careers of Sir Henry Brooke Parnell, First Baron Congleton, and John Vesey Parnell, Second Baron Congleton, see the entries by G. F. R. Barker, revised by Peter Gray, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2000 – 2009.

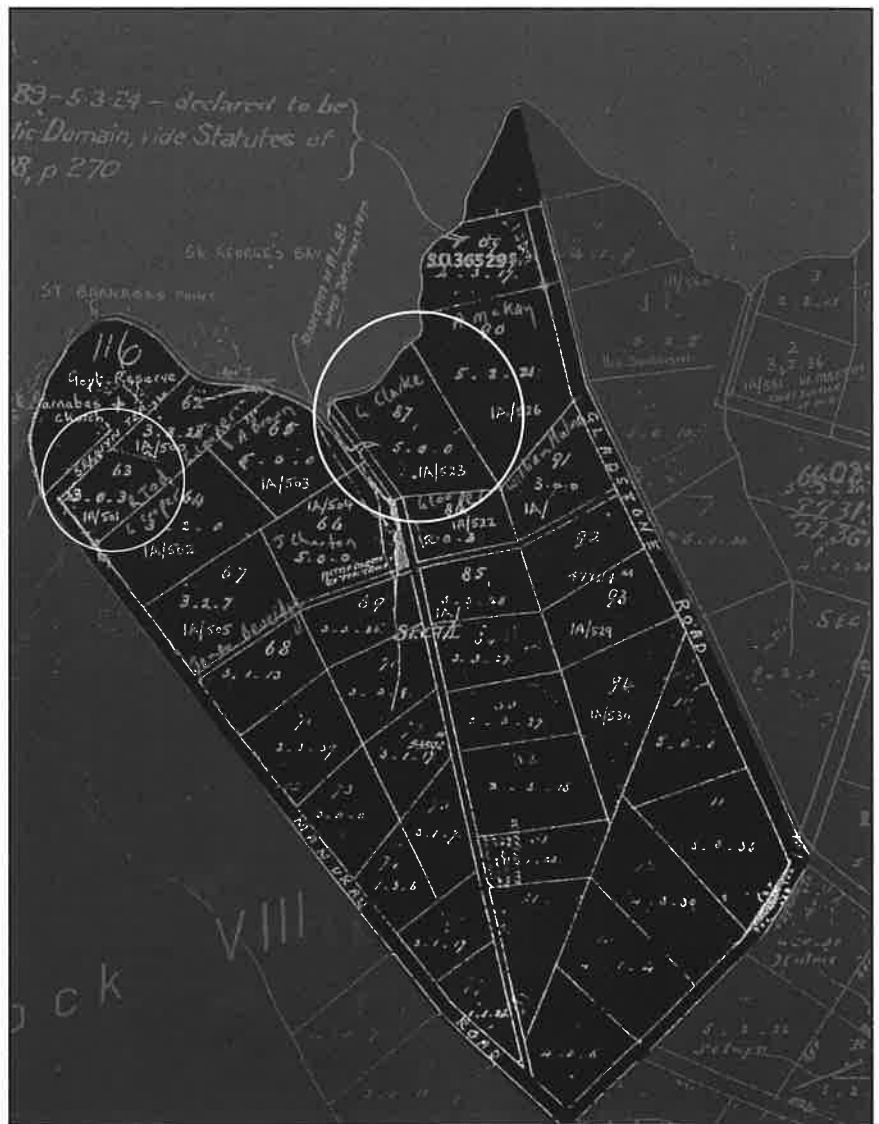
and Patrick Tod also left the East. They wound up their business in Damascus and Baghdad by 1836 and sailed for the new colony of South Australia in the following year.

AUCKLAND 1841

Fast forward then to the second Auckland Land Sale on 1 September 1841. Robert Tod, after two years in Adelaide (South Australia's Tod River is named after him) and two years in Port Nicholson (Wellington) as a merchant and shipping agent, had decided to turn his attention to land speculation. A bid of £244.10s.4d. secured him the highly desirable second item in the auction, Allotment 63, Section 1, Suburbs of Auckland, and two days later plans had already been drawn up, dividing his three acre block into 36 small sections. On 4 September it was advertised for sale by auction under the name of the 'Village of Parnell'.

This village is situated on the first Suburban Section adjoining the Town. On one side it fronts Mechanics' Bay, commanding a beautiful view of Auckland, and the Shipping; on another, the Manakao, while a road and Government reserve of some extent bound it towards the north.

New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette, 4 September 1841, p.3.



Map of early Parnell showing the sections available in the first suburban Auckland land sale, September 1841. Lot 63 was purchased by Robert Tod and Lot 87 by George Clarke (both circled). See page 10. Survey Plan 663, Lands and Survey Department, Auckland.



Photograph of Mechanics Bay c.1861, looking east towards St Barnabas Point. The houses to the right of the church, bounded by Augustus Terrace and Manukau (Parnell) Road, are part of Allotment 63, Tod's 'Village of Parnell'. Richardson Collection, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 4-535.

SALES BY AUCTION

BY MESSRS. MASON AND PATON

Land at Windsor Terrace – Fourteen allotments with 40 feet frontage and 100 feet depth; average from 7s.6d. to 9s. per foot – Two corner allotments 14s. per foot.

Land in Village of Parnell. – The allotments 36 in number, sold as follows: -

In Patrick's Terrace, 15s. per foot frontage

In Groves'-street at 7s.6d. ditto

In Calman-street at 7s. ditto

In Cronan-street, at 6s. 6d. ditto

Land in Village of Epsom. – Twenty-three allotments; from ten-pence to five shillings and eight-pence per foot frontage.

=====

New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette,
11 September 1841, p.3.

The proof that the 'village' was named after John Vesey Parnell lies in the fact that its street names were obviously chosen in memory of the Baghdad community: Patrick's Terrace (now part of Augustus Terrace); and Groves (Eglon), Calman (Marston), and Cronin (Fox) Streets. But none of Tod's original choices struck any chords with the local community and they were very soon changed. The name of Parnell, however, found more favour with the city fathers, possibly because of its association with a distinguished British dynasty, and so it was gradually applied to the whole length of the Manukau Road as far as Newmarket, and then to the Highway Board District in 1863, and the Borough in 1877.

Robert Tod would have been able to explain the mysterious names if he had stayed in New Zealand, but he had seriously over-extended himself by borrowing to finance his speculations, and eventually, in 1847, he had to assign his assets to the banks and other creditors and retreat to Adelaide.

But that is another story still waiting to be told. 