The Red Gum Bookcase: South Australia's Earliest and Most Enigmatic Piece of Colonial Furniture

JUSTIN GARE

In 2017 a colossal, four-door bookcase made of river red gum appeared at an Adelaide auction, presented as an important piece of furniture in the Regency Gothic style, made *c.* 1845 (Figure 1). It is the only piece of Australian colonial furniture made almost entirely out of red gum known to have survived. Its appearance facilitated the discovery of a further bookcase mentioned in 1848 press reports as designed by the colonial architect George Strickland Kingston, but subsequently lost. Both bookcases share many unusual inventive details strongly indicative that the two pieces shared the same designer.

George Kingston is inextricably linked with the formation of South Australia. Unlike any other Australian settlement, the partially self-governing colony of South Australia was unique, born of the British social reforms of the 1830s. Originally promoted in accordance with socially radical ideals, it was initiated as an act of parliament in London in August 1834 and based on Edward Gibbon Wakefield's scheme of systematic colonization. However, the practical settlement was beset by problems of surveys, allocation and sale of land, and conflict between the South Australian Commissioners and the Colonial Administration. By 1841 it was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and the colony plunged into a period of great austerity.

How did a major piece of unprecedented design originate from the turbulence of a fledgling settlement, whose population barely tallied eight thousand? Clearly the piece was built as a statement and at considerable cost, but why was it made of red gum, such a difficult timber to work and practically unsuitable for fine cabinetmaking? When was it made and who built it? Who commissioned it and for what purpose? Why was it never completed? How did such a striking piece disappear, literally without trace, and how did it survive in near perfect, unaltered condition?

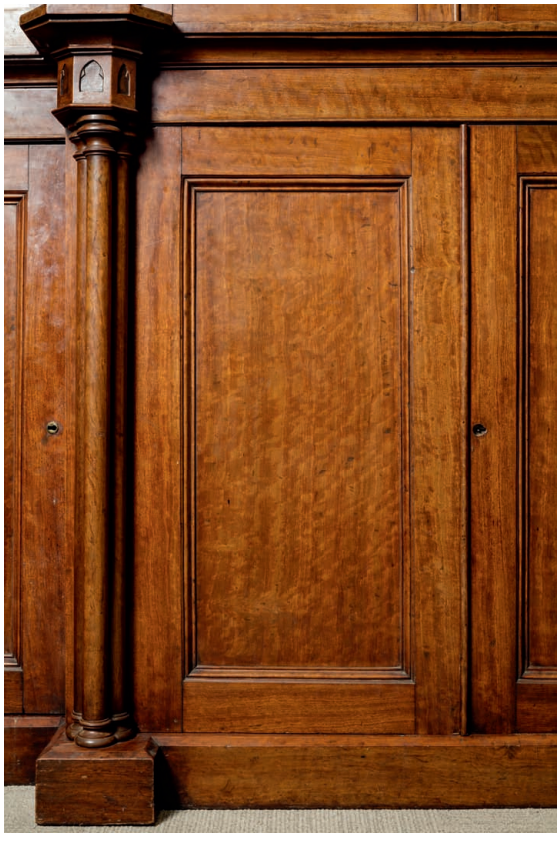
This article examines the evidence for the reported dating of the bookcase by analysis of its construction, materials, and hardware. In the light of these findings, but with less direct evidence, it proposes a possible explanation for how it came to be.

THE BOOKCASE

Scammell's auctioned the bookcase on 27 November 2017, lot 186.[1] Tobias Crilly, decorative arts auctioneer, suggested it might have been made for the Adelaide City Council (1840) or the Legislative Council (1843). It had been part of the estate of Manfred and Beverly Stibr at Semaphore, a coastal suburb of Adelaide. Their children

[1] https://auctions.scammellauctions.com.au/lots/view/1-KGWT9/colonial-breakfront-bookcase, accessed 10 Feb 2019.

1 Breakfront bookcase, made of river red gum and Baltic pine. Unusually, the sides of the bookcase have been panelled. *Sam Noonan*



2 (left) The solid panel doors with interlocked grain characteristic of red gum. Tri-clustered engaged columns are very rare in Australian colonial furniture. *Sam Noonan*

3 (right) The original colour of the polished timber seen on the leading edge of the shelf protected from fading, by the stile of the door. *Sam Noonan*

and grandchildren are unclear where it was purchased, but think it was most likely bought locally in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Allan Aughey, Mayor of Clare and Gilbert Valleys Council, generously purchased the bookcase for $58,250 and donated it to the Clare Library provided that it remain in South Australia and be accessible to the public.

The breakfront bookcase is enormous. Standing 301cm high, 244 cm wide and 73 cm deep, its massive, solid appearance impresses even the most casual observer. It is executed in an overtly architectural style of Gothic Revival. The bookcase is made almost entirely of river red gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, which has faded to a dark golden brown (Figure 2).[2] Inside, protected from light, the timber retains its rich blood-red colour; the polished edges of the shelves show how striking the bookcase must once have been (Figure 3). It is in original condition, with no alterations, virtually no damage and very little wear and tear.

The bookcase has two distinctive design elements. The first consists of four sets of tri-clustered engaged columns (that is, a cluster of three columns joined to each other and to the stile of the door, not freestanding) attached to the hinged side of each door

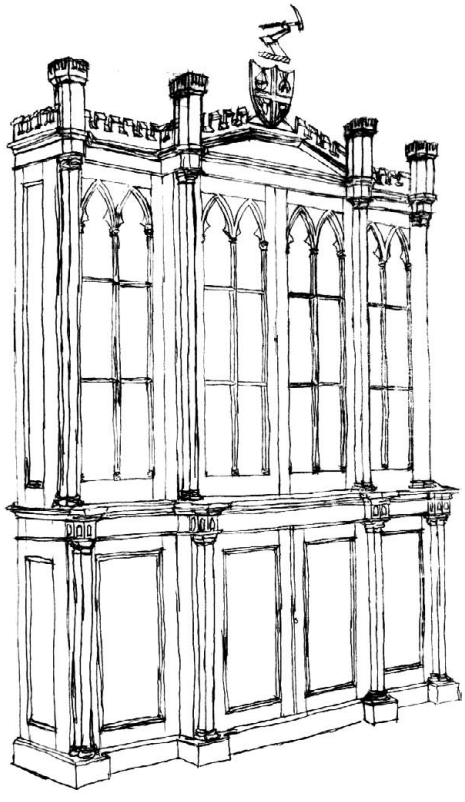
[2] The auctioneers commissioned Dr Jugo Ilic to identify the timber.

4 (top let) Detail of primary and secondary breakfront, showing scratch-stock mouldings and the tri-clustered engaged columns supporting an octagonal secondary breakfront. A secondary tri-clustered column forms the moulding to the vertical glazing bars. This terminates at the base with a turned plinth resting on an un-moulded and un-weathered sill. *Sam Noonan*

5 (top right) Gabled crenellated parapet with a supporting structure behind the truncated apex, contemporary to the bookcase's manufacture. *Sam Noonan*

6 (bottom left) External mitre of the parapet with un-crenellated section, forward facing lapped dovetails, abruptly terminated gable moulding and semi-octagonal block with saw and plane marks, all indicating a missing component. The absence of polish marks, screw or nail holes suggests that there was never anything there and that the bookcase was unfinished. *Sam Noonan*

7 (above) Government House, Sydney, designed in 1834 by the English architect Edward Blore. Construction began in 1837. The extensive use of crenellated parapets and octagonal turrets were indicative of contemporary Georgian ideas of how Gothic should appear, prior to Pugin's designs for the new British Parliament. *The Author*



8 (right) Impression of the completed bookcase design with octagonal turrets and crest. *The author*

stile of both the upper and lower sections (Figure 4). Secondly, each of these eight sets of clustered engaged columns is capped with an octagonal block, which forms its own separate breakfront, apparent on the plinth, waist and capital. These shall be referred to as secondary breakfronts. The carcass is constructed with framed end panels, top and bottom, because solid planks of red gum are not dimensionally stable.

The bookcase's entablature does not consist of a projecting cornice, as one might expect, but a crenellated parapet or battlements, as well as several other peculiarities:

- a 330 mm gap in the centre of the apex, which has a sturdy supporting structure behind it (Figure 5);
- the crenellations are not continuous, but with blank sections directly above the four sets of engaged columns (Figures 5 and 6);
- the external mitre of the breakfront is lap-dovetailed leaving end-grain exposed to the front — exposed end grain, particularly to the façade, is the cabinetmaker's cardinal sin (Figure 6);
- the semi-octagonal blocks of the upper tri-clustered pilasters support nothing; they terminate in broad semi-octagonal figures. The top sides of these figures retain evidence of pit saw marks from the original milling and hand-plane chatter marks, all of which had been polished over, contemporary with the original finish (Figure 6).

These peculiarities make sense if some ornamental device, such as an armorial crest, sat at the apex of the raking parapet and the octagonal blocks were capped with octagonal turrets, in the manner of a Georgian Gothic building (Figure 7). These additions would continue the strong visual vertical thrust, creating a striking architectural roof-scape. The recessed parapet becomes part of a well thought out, sophisticated and balanced profile. The bookcase would no longer appear as heavy or truncated, as an artist's impression demonstrates (Figure 8).

This might imply that these decorative elements were removed. However, no screw or nail holes coincide with the locations of possible missing elements, while all the surfaces are polished, with no silhouettes or shadows of missing components. It is clear that they were never present (Figure 6); therefore, I believe the bookcase was never completed.

Adding the likely missing design elements of the red gum bookcase would make the bookcase taller (Figure 8). Considering the vertical emphasis of Gothic design, the missing central motif would probably be taller than it was wide, taking the final height to more than 340 cm.

COMPARABLE BOOKCASES

How common are colonial three-metre high bookcases? A survey was undertaken of about seventy bookcases illustrated in the reference books *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture* and *Australian Furniture*.[3] The two tallest bookcases, both Gothic and both cedar, are the same height as the red gum bookcase, slightly over three metres. The first is housed in Government House, Hobart (Figure 9).[4] The second was considered to have been made in New South Wales *c*. 1880 (Figure 10).[5] However, it bears a singular resemblance to an 1848 newspaper description of a bookcase designed by Adelaide colonial architect, George Strickland Kingston:

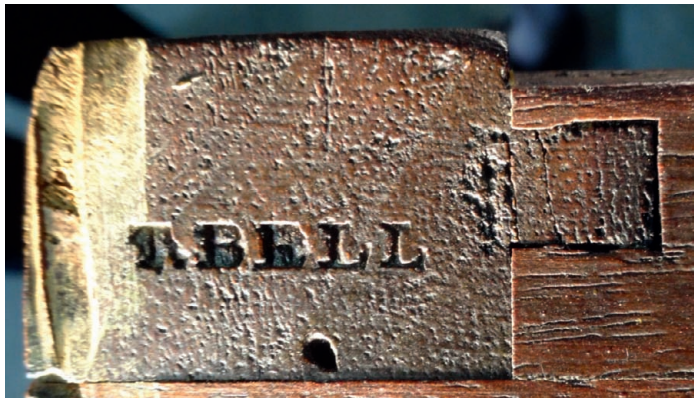
> On Tuesday we inspected a piece of furniture, of which the maker may be justly proud, and the future owner contemplate with entire satisfaction, as the perfect realization of his own beautiful design. It is a bookcase of noble dimensions, (fifteen feet in length by eleven feet in height) composed entirely of colonial cedar; and the design, being purely gothic ... The six upper doors, which close upon fifteen book-shelves, and are to be handsomely glazed, will be in perfect keeping with the whole; and each of the panels in the doors of the lower compartments is enriched by heraldic shields in bold relief. Within these doors are thirty cabinet drawers, doubtless intended to be severally furnished by G. S. Kingston Esq., the architect, who has designed this very chaste and handsome piece of furniture for his own use, with the choice specimens of the varied productions of South Australia. Mr. Bell, of Rundle-street, the maker ... [6]

The cedar bookcase, now in Sydney, matches the one described above, with some of the specimen drawers still intact. On close examination, the bookcase appears to

[3] Fahy, Simpson and Simpson (1985); Fahy and Simpson (1998).
[4] Fahy, Simpson and Simpson (1985), p. 284. John Hawkins proposes a possible attribution to the architect J. L. Archer as designer and J. W. Woolley as maker; *Australiana* (2009), p. 21.
[5] Fahy and Simpson (1998), p. 307.
[6] *South Australian Register*, 13 May 1848, p. 2.

9 Gothic bookcase in Government House, Hobart, stamped with a broad arrow and King's Yard mark 'K Y', indicating a date of no later than about 1836. The bookcase has tri-clustered engaged columns and is over 3 m tall. *Peter Hughes*

10 Cedar bookcase designed by Kingston and made by Bell for Kingston, 1848. It appears to have had a section removed from above the lower doors, probably a row of drawers, reducing its original height of 11 feet to 10 feet. This may explain the un-capped columns to the lower section. This and the completed red gum bookcase, appear to be Australia's tallest nineteenth-century bookcases. *St Aloysius' College, Sydney*



11 Maker's stamp of Thomas Bell on the 1848 cedar bookcase designed by Kingston. *St Aloysius' College, Sydney*

have had many minor alterations. Numerous pieces of evidence, such as the abrupt termination of the faceted half-columns, lacking capitals, on the lower section, point to the possibility that a horizontal section has been removed, most likely a row of drawers. This could not be confirmed without removing the upper section. If this is the case, it may explain the discrepancy between the eleven feet (335 cm) height cited in the newspaper article and the current height of 301 cm. If the bookcase were originally eleven feet, it would be the tallest surviving bookcase from this period, and a similar height to the completed red gum bookcase, if the finished dimensions proposed here are taken into account. This cedar bookcase bears Thomas Bell's maker's stamp, T. BELL (Figure 11), and must surely be the piece described in the South Australian Register in 1848 as designed in Adelaide by George Strickland Kingston.

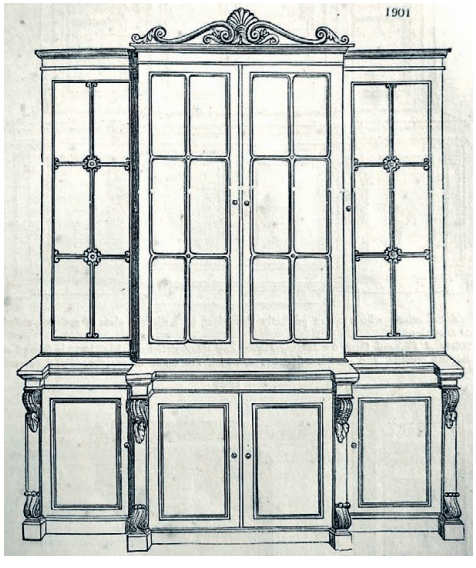
The red gum bookcase and the Kingston/Bell bookcase share two other peculiarities rarely seen in Australian furniture. The first is the use of tri-clustered engaged columns. Tri-clustered engaged columns were found on only one other piece of colonial furniture, albeit in a primitive form: the *c.* 1835 bookcase in Government House, Hobart (Figure 9).[7] This form of column is in general very rare. In 2014, Christies in London sold an English bookcase which had tri-clustered engaged columns.[8] That example, attributed to Gillows, has similar trefoil plinths and capitals and banded columns. No examples of this detail could be found in the hundreds of cabinet designs collected together in the *Pictorial Dictionary of British 19th Century Furniture Design*.[9] That search is not exhaustive, but it does indicate how rare this detail is.

The second peculiar detail is the use of primary and secondary breakfronts. The primary breakfront refers to the central section of the cabinet that projects forward, creating two wings set back from the central front. The secondary breakfront refers

[7] Fahy, Simpson and Simpson (1985), p. 284. John Hawkins suggests J. A. Archer as possible designer, inferring a date of manufacture prior to 1837 when he was still in charge of the King's Yard where the piece was made. Hawkins (2009), p. 21 and p. 25. The tri-clustered columns on this piece do not extend to the plinth or capital, that is they are not trefoiled, but are formed from a single circular turning.

[8] Christie's, London, 16 September 2014, lot 195. https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/a-regency-kingwood-banded-satinwood- library-bookcase-almost-5825442-details.aspx.

[9] Joy (1977).



12 J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, 1833, Figure 1901.

13 J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, 1833, Figure 1902.

to the four individual projections that either support or cap the engaged columns. These primary and secondary breakfronts occur to both the upper and lower sections, including the waist (Figures 1 and 4). This creates, in effect, a series of projecting and receding planes on the capital, plinth and waist, as compared to a simple straight moulding. As yet, this combination of primary and secondary breakfronts has not been found in any other Australian colonial furniture. This detail of primary and secondary breakfronts is found, in various forms, in only a relatively small number of British examples, possibly because it complicates opening the doors.[10] On the Hobart cedar bookcase (Figure 9), the columns touch the door when it is opened but on the red gum and Kingston/Bell bookcases, the columns are engaged to the door stile and the door swings freely. The individual doors are asymmetric to accommodate the extra width of the columns.

Loudon's popular 1833 pattern book, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, contains two examples most reminiscent of the red gum bookcase in regard to their proportion and the primary and secondary breakfronts, though neither pattern shows the detail to all levels (Figures 12 and 13).[11] In South Australia, George Kingston had access to a copy of Loudon's book, which is a likely

[10] Joy (1977) shows examples of high cabinets with the use of both primary and secondary breakfronts beginning to be more common after the 1850s, although not necessarily to all of the upper, lower and waist levels of the cabinets, pp. 92–99. Prior to the 1850s, the dictionary shows only two examples both of which have no secondary breakfronts at the waist level, pp. 90–91.

[11] Loudon (1833), figs 1901 and 1902, pp. 1053 and 1054.

source for the basic carcass design for the red gum bookcase.[12] Australian furniture of the early colonial period conforms more or less to an English style, transferred to Australia by three main conduits: firstly, by émigré cabinetmakers familiar with current fashions; secondly by pattern-books; and thirdly by copying and adapting the designs of imported English furniture.[13] Of course, regional variations, according to the practical and aesthetic skill of the individual cabinetmaker or designer as well as the adaptation of local timbers and their characteristics, may be distinguished as colonial, but seldom do these variations obscure their English origins. As a result, it is generally accepted that Australia had no one sufficiently inventive enough to justify the title 'furniture designer' until the twentieth century.[14] However, I argue that the overt architectural detailing of the red gum and Kingston/Bell bookcases cannot be traced to any conventional source of furniture design, pattern book or otherwise. The two designs manifest a level of sophistication and coherent detail that is singularly original.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND KINGSTON'S VISION

Kingston was and still is a controversial character with no shortage of detractors. He has been unfairly cast as the villain in most historical accounts of the early years of settlement. However, we need to understand Kingston to understand his work. The architectural historian Donald Langmead best describes Kingston's character:

> … his honesty and forthrightness, often tactless, bordered upon aggressiveness; certainly, it won him few friends. Perhaps he was naïve enough to believe that others would respond with honesty for honesty. There is little doubt that Kingston was arrogant, and when he found himself in positions of authority, he seems to have been incapable of exercising that authority graciously … But his quick temper and superciliousness must not be equated with a lack of personal integrity.[15]

George Strickland Kingston (1807–80) was born in Ireland (Figure 14). His early career appears to have been of a practical and ordinary nature, providing him with a good grounding as a civil engineer and possibly, to a lesser extent, in the related fields of planning and construction. In March 1834, aged 27, he moved to London and volunteered his services in various capacities to the South Australian Association at Adelphi Terrace for a period of two years. Langmead suggests that he was initially motivated by ambition but became a 'firm and idealistic supporter of The Idea [of a South Australian colony] within a few months' and he became a 'preacher of civil, religious and political liberty'.[16]

[12] Johnson (2013), pp. 31 and 156. The broad influence of Loudon's *Encyclopaedia* as a pattern book for furniture is discussed in detail in Fahy, Simpson and Simpson (1985), pp. 215–18, including a citation from an 1840 letter by Lady Franklin complaining of the absence of reference books (in Tasmania) except for her own copy of Loudon's *Encyclopaedia*.

[13] Craig, Fahy and Robertson (1972), pp. 6–7.

[14] Personal communication with Peter Hughes, Senior Decorative Arts Curator, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; John Hawkins of J. B. Hawkins Antiques; and Jo Vandepeer.

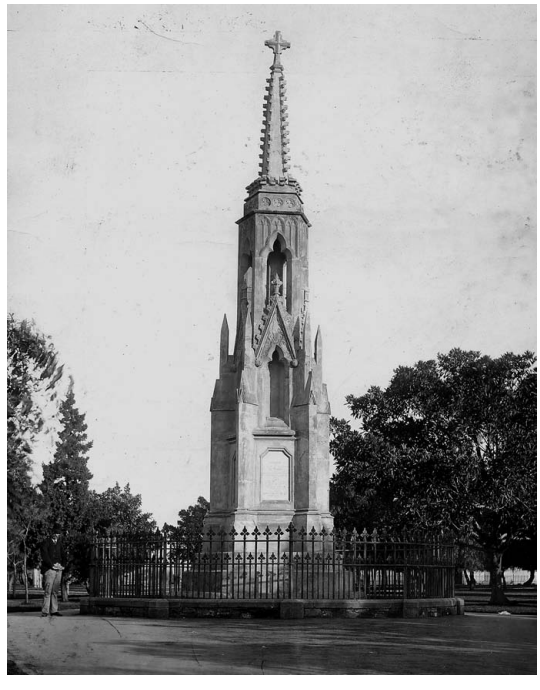
[15] Johnson (2013), p. 73.

[16] Langmead (1994), p. 22 and p. 181.

14 S. T. Gill (1818–1880), George Strickland Kingston, from *Heads of the People*, 1849. Kingston had by this time become quite wealthy, despite his battered old hat. *State Library of South Australia, B350*

The social malaise in England during the early nineteenth century produced many advocates of social reform such as Jeremy Bentham, Robert Owen, John Loudon, John Roebuck, James Mill and John Stuart Mill. Their ideas helped catalyse Edward Wakefield Gibbon's proposals for systematic colonization which in turn prompted Robert Gouger's formation of the South Australian Association. The Association became a practical focus for numerous energetic and enthusiastic men, such as Kingston, who 'stood out among his peers in the establishment as committed to the idea of the colony of South Australia'.[17] The energetic Irishman believed in and was eager to contribute to the Utopian vision and he rose to the occasion in many capacities. He actively lobbied parliamentarians in the long and protracted negotiations to pass the South Australian Act of 1834 in the House of Commons. Then as head of the Survey Department for the South Australian Association, Kingston became 'the principal practical planner of the expedition to settle the South [Australian colony]'.[18] He was responsible for 'preparing plans for permanent and temporary buildings and, most importantly, in charge of designing the "plan of Town"' as well as preparing strategies for 'the survey of the coast of the colony with a view to ascertaining the proper site for the town'.[19] These strategies became the basis of the

[17] Ibid., p. 32.
[18] Johnson (2013), p. 72.
[19] Ibid., p. 95.



15 Colonel Light Monument, designed by Kingston 1842, his most architecturally complex building, demolished 1905. Photograph, *c.* 1890. *State Library of South Australia PRG 280/1/17/88*

Colonial Commissioners' instructions to the Surveyor-General Colonel William Light.[20]

In August 1834, Kingston was instrumental in forming the South Australian Literary Association, soon to become the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association. The association collected books from over 150 donors, which eventually formed the basis of the South Australian State Library.[21] Arriving in South Australia a month after Colonel Light on 11 September 1836, Kingston spent most of the next two months exploring and assessing the Adelaide plains as Deputy Surveyor. During this time, he discovered the site for Adelaide, 'studied its qualities, determined its suitability, and then successfully argued for its adoption'.[22] In 1838, without formal training, he began his architectural career with a commission to design Government House. Other major early works were the Wesleyan Chapel (1838), the Public Offices in Victoria Square (1839), the Congregational Chapel (1839) and Adelaide Gaol (1840).

In November 1840, he was appointed the town surveyor for the newly formed Adelaide City Council. Sometime before May 1842, he designed a Gothic monument to Colonel Light, who had died of tuberculosis in October 1839 (Figure 15).[23] Kingston's altruism became increasingly evident as the colony progressed. He maintained an active interest in the progress of setting up the British Empire's first free public

[20] Langmead (1994), p. 30.
[21] Johnson (2013), pp. 74–75.
[22] Ibid., p. 93.
[23] The monument to Light, towering 45 feet high over his grave, is another example of Kingston's penchant for massive scale.

botanic garden in Adelaide, in 1839.[24] He fought against foreign investment in Burra's 'monster' copper mine, such that the profits would stay and benefit the state. Even after Kingston had established his own financial security, so that he need not have worked again, he became a politician identifying 'with every movement to advance the colonial interest … and reformer of the highest school'.[25] Perhaps most notable were his efforts to secure universal male suffrage in 1855, the first Australian colony to do so (well before Britain) and one of the first Australian colonies to introduce the secret ballot. He was knighted in 1870.

THE CABINETMAKER

Between 1839 and 1843, almanacs and trade directories list thirteen cabinetmakers advertising in Adelaide.[26] Most of these advertisements are notices of starting up their trade upon their arrival in the colony. None of these cabinetmakers distinguished themselves within their field, with the notable exception of Thomas Bell (1810–1871). Several of Bell's specific works are noted in Adelaide newspapers of the late 1840s. He had trained in London and had established a 'reputation as an accomplished cabinet-maker'.[27] Bell and his family sailed to South Australia with Kingston on the Cygnet. He was apparently considered a person of desirable character and skill to be accepted into the employment of Colonel William Light as a carpenter for his survey party, under Kingston's supervision. Bell completed his work on Colonel Light's survey team in September 1837 before establishing his own cabinet-making business. During this period of sixteen months, onboard the Cygnet and then working together, it is likely that Kingston had become well acquainted with Bell's character and workmanship. Bell's cabinet-making business attracted both private and government work, including fitting out the government infirmary and dispensary.[28] Bell probably continued a professional relationship with Kingston, who supervised the construction of many private and government buildings.

Bell completed commissions for the Colonial Secretary, Robert Gouger, in August 1839 and another bookcase of 'colossal dimensions', possibly also designed by Kingston, for Edward Stephens, the manager of the South Australian Banking Company.[29] Bell family descendants maintain that Thomas Bell made all the furniture for Adelaide's Government House, although no documentary evidence exists to support this claim.[30] After he arrived in May 1841, Governor Grey cancelled many government contracts. The ensuing recession forced Bell to sail to Hobart in July 1841 in search of work. Bell returned to Adelaide five years later, in June 1846.

[24] Johnson (2013), p. 157.
[25] Ibid., p. 73.
[26] Fahy, Simpson and Simpson (1985) p.102.
[27] White (1991), p. 4.
[28] Hasenohr (1977), p. 58.
[29] White (1991), p. 10. *South Australian Register*, 9 December 1848, p. 3. This bookcase is presumed to be by Kingston on the basis of its size and architectural nature. The article describes the doors as having an 'appearance of a series of Saxon arches' uncannily similar to the colonnade of arches that Kingston incorporated into the design of Stephen's Seacombe House, 1842.
[30] Personal communication with Maureen Bell, widow of Phillip Bell, descendant of Thomas Bell. Phillip's genealogical notes had several statements claiming that Thomas Bell had made 'all' the furniture for Government House but provided no source for this information.

In 1848, when Kingston designed the cedar bookcase now in Sydney, he chose Thomas Bell as cabinetmaker. This would seem an obvious choice for Kingston, because of their long and close acquaintance, Bell's reputation and experience as a cabinetmaker and the apparent absence of any competing cabinetmaker of his calibre. For the same reasons, I propose that Kingston turned to Thomas Bell to make the red gum bookcase. Bell eventually left for Melbourne in 1852 and had a long and remarkable career as a cabinetmaker in Victoria, his work being 'warmly commended' by the Duke of Edinburgh.[31]

USE OF RED GUM

Expert in wood identification, Dr Jugo Ilic determined that a sample of timber taken from one of the shelves of the bookcase is river red gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. The sample is the same timber as the rest of the cabinet, except the linings to the back and the internal parts of the drawers. The earliest reference to exporting red gum as a furniture timber was in August 1843.[32] This was from Adelaide. Trial exports of red gum in the form of 'furniture logs' were about to be sent to England where it was fetching prices similar to that of common Honduras mahogany, inferring that earlier shipments had already been made, presumably from Adelaide.

The first reference to a piece of furniture made of red gum was also in Adelaide, in January 1844, a pair of red gum cabinets made by 'Mr Allchin' for Governor Grey's wife and delivered to Government House.[33] The *Adelaide Observer* described the red gum 'folding doors and other parts of the exterior' with the mouldings cut in blackwood.[34] The idea that red gum was actively marketed for export from South Australia as a cabinet-making timber is strengthened by numerous articles appearing only in Adelaide newspapers, following the debate over tariffs on furniture timbers in Britain. The first appeared in August 1845, another in April 1846 and yet another in 1847, which reported that the Board of Customs in Great Britain had exempted Australian red gum from duty because it 'properly comes under the denomination of furniture wood'.[35] After Adelaide began its trial exports 'very large shipments of red gum for furniture began to be exported from Port Phillip'.[36] This export industry from both Adelaide and Melbourne appears to have been short lived.

The second reference to the use of red gum was in 1845, when a cabinetmaker in Melbourne worked up some of it into a loo table.[37] An 1849 reference to the same table explains that Lewis Kalz of Little Bourke Street made this 'regular triumph of

[31] White (1991), p. 25.
[32] *Adelaide Observer*, 26 August 1843, p. 5.
[33] The Greys took their furniture to New Zealand when he became governor there, but it may have been lost in a fire at Government House.
[34] *Adelaide Observer*, 27 January 1844, p. 5.
[35] *Adelaide Observer*, 2 August 1845, p. 3; *South Australian Register*, 25 April 1846, p. 3; *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register*, 20 March 1847, p. 4.
[36] *Adelaide Observer*, 1 February 1845, p. 3.
[37] Ibid.

colonial art' over several years, from many samples of different timbers.[38] In 1852, auction notices in Melbourne list a curious cluster of red gum pieces, such as drawing room chairs and a couch, both made by Thwaites of Melbourne.[39] The red gum was a decorative component and not necessarily part of the upholstered structure. Another 1852 auction notice lists a bookcase simply as a 'unique red gum book-case'.[40] The fact that these pieces were from household auctions suggest that they were made at an earlier date and were from deceased estates or being sold to upgrade to more fashionable styles. The whereabouts of these examples are unknown. The evidence suggests that the use of red gum as a fine cabinet-making timber originated in Adelaide and was confined to the decade of the 1840s.

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

On the premise that Kingston designed the Adelaide bookcase, which was most likely made by Bell, I have attempted to date it by its style, the hardware used and by the tools used in its construction. In an attempt to date the construction of the bookcase I placed it in a series using two other known works in the Gothic style by Kingston. I also used this method of seriation to analyse the materials and construction aspects of the bookcase. Kingston's first known Gothic work was his monument to Colonel Light designed sometime between late 1841 and May 1842 (Figure 15). His second known Gothic work was the Sydney cedar bookcase, made in 1848 (Figure 10). We can seriate the three Gothic examples, despite the differing media, because all three have strong architectural references in common. Kingston is known to have supplied the 'detailed working drawings' of the Light monument to the stone mason as work progressed and that allows a degree of confidence that we are viewing Kingston's actual details, not those of the stone masons.[41]

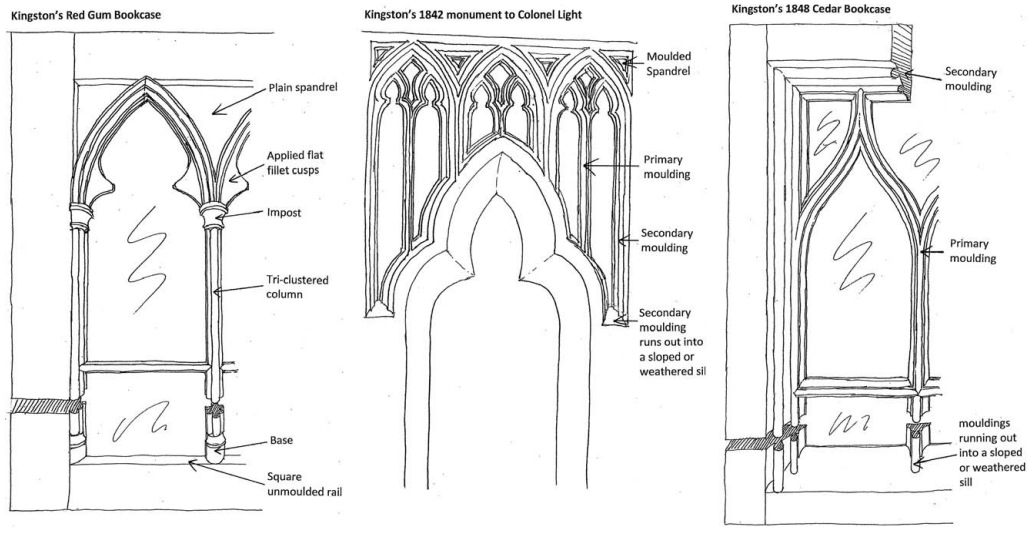
The 1842 and 1848 examples share similarities in the arches that are absent from the red gum bookcase (Figure 16). The series of low relief arches in the blind tracery of the 1842 monument and the 1848 arched glazing bars show the use of primary and secondary mouldings that merge into a horizontal weathered sill (Figure 19). The red gum arch has no continuous moulding either primary or secondary and no weathered or sloped sill, but an unmoulded square rail (Figures 4 and 17). Instead the sinuous

[38] *Argus*, 19 September 1849, p. 2. The article refers to a 'table recently transmitted from South Australia as a present to Her Majesty the Queen' by the colonists of South Australia. This did not happen: a sample circular table inlaid with South Australian and New Zealand timbers was made by Mr Mason (*Adelaide Times*, 4 June 1849, p. 3) but subscriptions of 1s to pay for the gift to the Queen were insufficient for its completion (*Adelaide Times*, 6 August 1849, p. 3).

[39] *Argus*, 18 November 1852, p. 6; *Argus*, 6 July 1852, p. 1. On Thwaites, see La Nauze (2017).

[40] *Argus*, 24 June 1852, p. 1. The 'unique red gum book-case' belonged to J. H. N. Cassell, who was the 'Collector of Customs' in Melbourne. The auction notice lists Cassell's furniture, which contains several pieces of furniture by Hobart cabinet makers. This might suggest that Cassell was in the habit of taking furniture with him from state to state, as he had started in the customs department in Hobart. Curiously, Cassell was sent to Adelaide to investigate the customs department there from October 1848 to April 1849, where he could possibly have purchased the Kingston red gum bookcase and taken it back to Melbourne. If this is the case, why did the auctioneers not refer to its enormous size or overt gothic style? The fact that the auctioneer's list describes other furniture in some detail might suggest that the bookcase was nondescript other than it was uniquely made of red gum.

[41] Langmead (1983), p. 566.

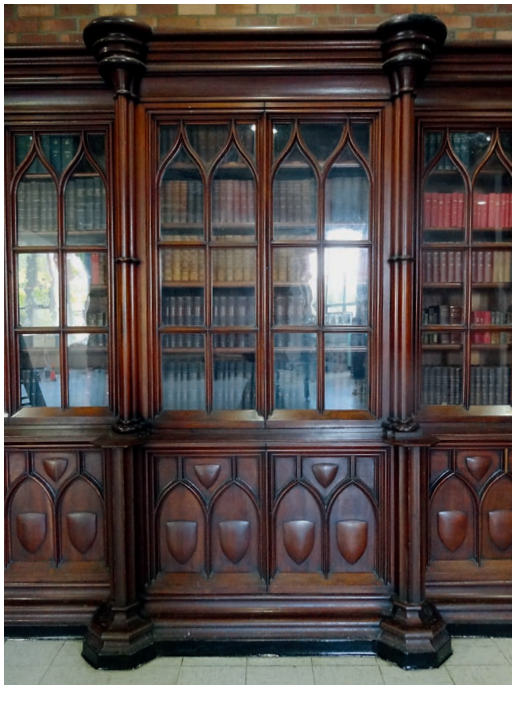


16 Seriation of Kingston's Gothic arches, with a detail of the arch from Light's monument drawn from a photograph taken *c.* 1890. *The Author*

Gothic lines are replaced with five distinct components: engaged columns; turned capitals (or imposts) and plinths; a single radius moulded arch; and an awkward flat fillet that forms the cusp of the arch, in silhouette only. The details of the arch are disproportionately small, unnecessarily complicated and aesthetically incoherent. Additionally, the triangular spandrel formed above and between the arches, is simply left as a blank un-moulded recess (Figure 17). This contrasts with the arches in low relief that decorate the space above the central Gothic aperture of the 1842 monument. The spandrels above the arches are moulded and bear some aesthetic relationship with the adjacent tracery. The cusped arches are formed with the use of a single continuous primary moulding, enclosed in a larger secondary moulding (Figure 16). In the 1848 design, Kingston has chosen a simple ogee arch with a continuous primary moulding. The ogee of the arch is formed from circular segments of the same radius that, when put together, form a series of arches that reproduce an inverted arch of the same shape above. The whole tracery or glazing bars are then also framed in a larger secondary moulding. The result is a simple coherent aesthetic that is uncluttered and elegant (Figures 18 and 19).

The three Kingston Gothic works show a clear evolution of ability, the red gum bookcase displaying the least proficiency of design. I conclude that the design of the red gum bookcase pre-dates Kingston's 1842 monument. Langmead has observed that the 1842 monument was the most architecturally complex design Kingston had attempted, 'much more finely detailed' and 'artistically more ambitious than any of Kingston's own earlier designs'.[42] The monument would have significantly exercised

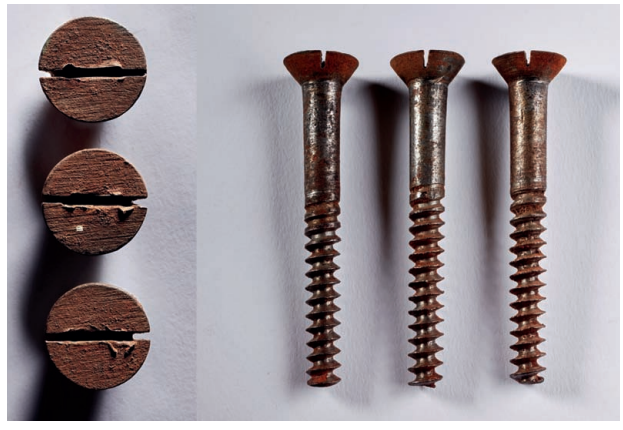
[42] Langmead (1994), pp.192 and 561.



17 (top left) The Gothic arch of the red gum bookcase contains five distinct components: trefoil columns, turned capitals and plinths, single radius arch and a flat fillet that forms a cusp. *Sam Noonan*

18 (top right) Detail of Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase, showing the ogee Gothic arch formed from a single primary moulding that forms the glazing bar. *St Aloysius' College, Sydney*

19 (bottom left) The primary moulding of the glazing bars is framed by a secondary moulding which forms a frame and a central mullion. The glazing bars terminate at the bottom with a heavily sloped (weathered) sill. These details owe more to architectural design than conventional cabinetmaking design. *St Aloysius' College, Sydney*



20 The earliest wood screw found in the crenellated parapet of the red gum bookcase, with characteristic blunt nose, hand-filed head and hand-cut slot, commonly made prior to 1837. *Sam Noonan*

21 Harvey patent wood screw, after 1837, with characteristic blunt nose, parallel thread, parallel core, concentric machining marks to the head and machine-cut slots. *Sam Noonan*

and expanded Kingston's Gothic vocabulary. The red gum bookcase would have been more nuanced, as evidence of Kingston's progression, if it had been designed after the monument.

HARDWARE

Three types of wood screws are used in the red gum bookcase. The first type has blunt ended threads (non-gimleted), distinctive longitudinal scoring on the shank, hand-finished heads and hand-cut slots (Figure 20). These details are characteristic of a type of screw manufactured prior to 1837, when they were quickly superseded by improvements in machine production.[43] The second and most abundant type of wood screw has a blunt nose with a parallel thread and root diameter that does not taper, similar to the first type (Figure 21). However, the head of the screw shows circular machine marks characteristic of Thomas W. Harvey's US patent 148 of 1837.[44]

The third type of screw is barely distinguishable from the second, having a slightly pointed thread and a tapering core. Correlating this third type of screw among the

[43] White (2006), p. 4.
[44] Ibid., pp.7 and 14; Jenkinson (1999), p. 60.

22 Transitional screw type found in a cabinet made in Adelaide for the Independent Order of Rechabites (Southern Star Tent No. 5), 1848. *State Library of South Australia SRG 164/137/10*

many transitional screws of the time is difficult. G. G. Jenkinson discusses the complex and convoluted development of the wood screw between 1831 and 1850 at length, concluding that 'the blunt pointed parallel shank and thread [as predominantly found in the red gum bookcase] was the accepted type of screw worldwide, although the tapered root diameter and parallel shank and thread, was becoming popular in the early 1840's'.[45]

To test Jenkinson's timeline, an investigation into cabinetry of known dates from Adelaide was carried out. Only two dated pieces of cabinet-making from Adelaide could be located: Kingston's cedar bookcase made before May 1848, and a cabinet now in the State Library of South Australia, made in June 1848 for Adelaide's branch of the Rechabite friendly society.[46] The screws from both cabinets have blunt points and parallel threads but tapered cores or 'root diameters' (Figure 22). These 1848 examples of screws are not found in the red gum bookcase but do tally with Jenkinson's timeline from the early 1840s to about 1850. Hence, the wood screws are consistent with the bookcase being made in the early 1840s.

TOOLS OF CONSTRUCTION

Pit saw marks are visible on various inconspicuous surfaces of the bookcase, particularly on the wider planks such as the top of the bottom section, and the back of the gabled pediment (Figure 23). The irregularity of the saw marks corresponds to the slight rocking of the pit saw as it is drawn back and forth (or up and down) by the sawyers. This is distinct from the regular curved pattern of a circular saw, or series of

[45] Jenkinson (1999), pp. 59–64.
[46] State Library of South Australia, SRG 164/137/10, https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/4207

23 Characteristic marks made by a pit saw on the back of the crenellated gable. *Sam Noonan*

parallel marks of a band saw. Pit saw marks indicate a very early period in the developing colony before ready access to circular sawmills and other powered machinery. Colonial Secretary Milner planned to build a sawmill at Hindmarsh, just east of the city in May 1839.[47] The South Australian Company had a sawmill in August 1841, though it was lying idle.[48] The increasing availability of sawmills would suggest that the time of manufacture of the red gum bookcase was consistent with the early 1840s. All the above features converge to suggest construction in the early 1840s, most likely before Colonel Light's monument was designed in May 1842.

ADELAIDE IN THE EARLY 1840S

The economic development of Adelaide, unlike other Australian capital cities, depended wholly on free settlers. It was not artificially buoyed by convict labour but driven by the labour of the colonists. Consequently, industry was slower to develop. Under Admiral John Hindmarsh, Governor between 1836 and 1838, South Australia's economy struggled to gain traction. When Governor Gawler arrived in Adelaide in

[47] *South Australian Gazette*, 1 June 1839, p. 2. In 1843 the colony's oldest sawmill was said to date from 1839, *South Australian*, 21 March 1843, p. 2.
[48] *South Australian*, 13 August 1841, p. 2.

24 J. Hitchen, lithograph after a painting by Edward Opie, *View of Adelaide, North Terrace looking South East*, 1841. Adelaide in 1841 was still essentially only a village amid a forest. *State Library of South Australia, B7070*

October 1838 he found 'the colony in a state of complete disorganization and stagnation' with 'four thousand immigrants … still eking out a miserable existence in dilapidated tents and shanties on the fringes of the city limits'.[49]

Nathaniel Hailes wrote the most evocative descriptions of this period, published in the South Australian Register in 1878. On arriving in March 1839, Hailes delivered the government dispatches to Governor Gawler at Government House, which he described as 'an extraordinary uncouth and repulsive structure. Its walls were of limestone and the roof of thatch' resembling a moderate-sized barn.[50] He describes Adelaide:

> At that time it resembled an extensive gipsy encampment. Not the semblance of a street existed on the land, although all the main streets had been duly laid down on the plan. It was in fact an extensive woodland, with here a solitary tent and there clusters of erratic habitations. There were canvas tents, calico tents, tarpaulin tents, wurleys made of branches, log huts, packing case villas, and a few veritable wooden cottages, amid which here and there appeared some good houses … It was easy to lose oneself in the heavily wooded city even in the daytime and at night it was scarcely possible to avoid doing so.[51]

Some months later when they began to remove trees and their stumps where the streets were to be, 'there were pitfalls and man-traps in all directions'.[52] Government buildings 'consisted mainly of weatherboards, scattered over different parts of the forest, as though some special advantage were obtainable through their being widely separated'.[53] Hailes' observations correlate well with J. Hitchen's lithograph of Adelaide looking southeast from North Terrace *c.* 1841 (Figure 24).

49 Price (1936), p. 63; White (1991) p. 10.
50 White (1991), p. 60.
51 Peters (1998), p. 11.
52 Ibid, p. 12.
53 Ibid, p. 19.

To stimulate the economy, Gawler borrowed funds for government building projects: primarily Government House, Victoria Square public offices and the Adelaide Gaol, all designed by Kingston. This in turn prompted the building of many private buildings, including the Congregational and Wesleyan Chapels, also designed by Kingston. Hailes observes that 1839 and 1840 were the years when official squabbles gave way to productive energy, public buildings were constructed from brick and stone, and houses built of two stories instead of one. They even built a 28 foot, 9 ton cutter, the O. G. at Glenelg.[54] By October 1840, South Australia had accrued a large debt, and further funding was withheld. Addresses to Governor Gawler expressing anxiety that bills were no longer being honoured began to appear in the papers from 26 February 1841. Thomas Bell and George Kingston were among 1,478 colonists who signed a letter seeking assurance that their bills might be paid, published on the front page of The South Australian on 23 March 1841. Finally, Governor Gawler was recalled back to England. The new governor, Captain George Grey, arrived in Adelaide on 10 May 1841 and quickly imposed stringent economies, cutting the government's wages bill and cancelling contracts, inducing a severe depression. Grey notoriously refused to pay *2s 6d* for a pane of glass and *8d*. to an office boy to sharpen pencils.[55] At this point in time the population was about 8,000, a sixth of which became unemployed. By 1842, 642 out of 1,915 houses in Adelaide were abandoned.[56] Hailes observed that all were living beyond their means when the recession hit like a 'torpedo'.[57] 'The economy was insolvent. The panic was universal'.[58] Governor Grey's draconian measures lasted until his departure in 1845. A grand red gum bookcase was, therefore, more likely to be constructed before March 1841, when Governor Gawler was spending extravagantly, than in the following era of severe depression presided over by Governor Grey.

ORIGIN OF THE COMMISSION

We do not know who commissioned the red gum bookcase. It is unlikely that an invoice or record of payment exists, as the bookcase was never completed. No mention of its construction is to be found in any newspapers of the time, despite many articles referring to noteworthy pieces of furniture constructed by local cabinetmakers. Considering the early stage of development of the colony, the possible options for its origins are limited. The bookcase's overwhelming size, Gothic style and choice of difficult but highly figured timber suggests that it may have been an aspirational piece for a large house or corporation. Commissioning of the bookcase is most likely associated with an architectural commission of Kingston's between 1839 and 1845. Based on Langmead's list of Kingston's work, the extravagant architectural commissions for which a bookcase of this nature would seem appropriate are: Government House (March 1839), Cummins House (1842), Seacombe House (1842), Kingston's Grote

54 Peters (1998), p. 195 and p. 177.
55 'Grey, Sir George (1812–1898)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*,http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/grey-sir-george-2125/text2691.
56 Price (1936), p. 68.
57 Peters (1998), p. 103.
58 Ibid., p.104.

Street residence (1842), and the Council rooms of the Corporation of the City of Adelaide (January 1841). Kingston's other architectural work of this period was of low cost and utilitarian.[59] The claims of each of these possibilities will be discussed in turn.

GOVERNMENT HOUSE

In October 1838, Governor Gawler commissioned Kingston to design a governor's residence; its east wing was completed in 1840. Gawler's verbal contract with Kingston was described as 'makeshift and irregular'.[60] 'Gawler and his officers were too ready to rely on verbal contracts, to accept tenders of their friends … and to ignore even the most casual supervision of public work'.[61] Each of his departments had questionable practices such as purchasing luxury items at exorbitant prices, vague receipts for large sums and duplicate payments for the same items.[62] If Kingston's commission included a bookcase, it may not have been recorded. Descendants of Thomas Bell claim that he made all the furniture for Government House, but are unable to cite any source, or identify the commissioning Governor.[63] By May 1841, Gawler was recalled to England, replaced by Governor Grey whose austere rule led to cancelling many government contracts. If Gawler had commissioned the bookcase either personally or as Governor, his unexpected recall may explain its incomplete state, as he left South Australia before it was finished. However, it is unlikely that Kingston would have designed a Neo-Classical building and not pursued the same style for its furniture. The provision for a coat of arms or crest is difficult to justify. If it were destined for Government House, the bookcase may have displayed the royal coat of arms, which would probably still be in its possession. A sense of propriety would have restrained Governor Gawler from displaying his own (unofficial) coat of arms.

CUMMINS HOUSE

Although Langmead states that the architect remains unknown for John Morphett's Cummins House, it was very likely Kingston.[64] Kingston and Morphett were acquainted in London, sailed on the *Cygnet* to South Australia and explored the Adelaide plains together. Their professional lives continued to entwine, both being founding members of the Freemason's Lodge of Friendship and both knighted in 1870 after long careers in politics. Kingston and Morphett were good friends and it would seem reasonable that Morphett would have chosen Kingston as architect for Cummins House, particularly, as Langmead concedes, Kingston was the best architect available and the only one with credible architectural pretensions.[65] Cummins House, built in

[59] Langmead (1994), p. 241–7.
[60] Ibid., p. 118.
[61] Pike (1957), p. 237–9.
[62] Ibid., p. 239.
[63] Personal communication with Maureen Bell, widow of Phillip Bell, descendant of Thomas Bell. Phillip's genealogical notes had several statements claiming that Thomas Bell had made 'all' the furniture for Government House but provided no source for this information.
[64] Langmead (1994), p. 184.
[65] Ibid., p. 182.

1842, was a large, lofty-ceilinged, five-room cottage well able to display the tall bookcase, but the house is reserved almost to the point of being plain. It is difficult to imagine the overtly Gothic bookcase sitting comfortably in this setting. If Morphett had commissioned Kingston to design the bookcase to coincide with the building of Cummins House, it could not have been made by Thomas Bell who had relocated to Hobart in 1841. It would also be difficult to explain why it was unfinished.

SEACOMBE HOUSE

Kingston designed Seacombe House for the manager of the South Australian Banking Co., Edward Stephens, in October 1842. An arched colonnade spanned the entire front façade of this elegant summer house. In 1848, Stephens had Thomas Bell make him a 'colossal bookcase', which had semicircular panels to the doors, and which presented the 'appearance of a series of Saxon arches'.[66] Its 'colossal' size and architectural references suggest Kingston designed it as well as the house. If Stephens had commissioned Kingston to design the red gum bookcase, why was it stylistically incongruous and why was it unfinished? When Seacombe House was built, Thomas Bell was working in Tasmania.

KINGSTON'S GROTE STREET RESIDENCE

Kingston borrowed large sums of capital even before he left London, to establish himself in South Australia. Once in South Australia his 'financial position would be precarious for years to come'.[67] Despite this Kingston still maintained grand pretentions and allegedly brought with him to Australia a 22 foot mahogany extension table, perhaps the first hint of his penchant for large pieces of furniture.[68] Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase that he designed for himself, funded by his Burra copper mine shares (that he had purchased with borrowed money), adds weight to this argument. Could this also be indicative of a previous commission for himself?

In November 1840 Kingston was appointed the town surveyor for the Corporation of the City of Adelaide (CCA) on a salary of £400 a year. Langmead describes Kingston as 'still so down at heel' at this point.[69] The CCA minutes reveal that he was required to pay a £500 bond for this position; Kingston had to borrow this from his friends Charles Mann and John Brown.[70] At this time, Kingston was living in Grote Street in a prefabricated 'Manning house'.[71] His 1842 extension was probably large enough to accommodate the red gum bookcase, considering Langmead cites the house as an example of Kingston's characteristic use of 'massive scale'.[72] However this coincides with his rapidly diminishing income. Kingston's income from the CCA was cut in half to £200 by October 1841.[73] As the CCA's financial troubles compounded, this was

[66] *South Australian Register*, 9 December 1848, p. 3.
[67] Langmead (1994), p. 112.
[68] The table is owned by Adelaide City Council but the provenance has been difficult to substantiate.
[69] Langmead (1994), p. 134.
[70] Adelaide City Council Archives, Minute book of the Mayor and Corporation of the City of Adelaide, p. 34.
[71] Langmead (1983), p. 676.
[72] Langmead (1994), p. 168.
[73] Ibid., p. 37.

slashed to £100 just eight months later.[74] The depression bit hard into Kingston's private work, reducing his architectural commissions. He received only seven commissions in 1841–42.[75] In 1843 he had only two commissions, his salary from the CCA was still unpaid, and he was surviving from only a small income from the Assurance Company.[76] Although Kingston was not averse to the risks of living on credit, it seems unlikely that he would have been able to pay for the bookcase.

THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF ADELAIDE

The Corporation of the City of Adelaide (CCA), now Adelaide City Council, offers the best circumstantial evidence for the origins of the unfinished red gum bookcase.

The CCA was formed in October 1840 in rented premises in Hindley Street, following a period when 'colonists were carried away in a flood of extravagance' supported by government spending.[77] The Corporation began in the same optimistic spirit 'swelling with pride' in its achievement of forming the first municipal authority in the British Empire.[78]

The CCA started spending borrowed funds, despite not yet having an income. Generous wages were allocated to council staff, including £400 salary for Kingston. In December 1840 a subcommittee was established to furnish the council rooms with a budget of £250 of more borrowings.[79] Considering the average weekly wage for a cabinetmaker was £1 10*s*, the council's furnishing budget seems generous if not extravagant.

In early January 1841 Kingston drafted plans and specifications for the new Council rooms. Only the specifications survive from which Langmead concludes 'the sumptuousness it described exposed the Corporation's clear if overblown image of its importance'.[80] Langmead recounts the elaborate details of the CCA brick building with an arcaded verandah with plastered ceiling and freestone paving. 'The prestige intended in the accommodation was indicated by such details as the skirting boards, fourteen inches high — the highest used in any of Kingston's contemporary designs. The architraves of the doors and windows, at eleven inches wide were also the most expansive he had ever specified'.[81] These specifications should be taken in the context that twenty-two months earlier Adelaide was described as a 'gipsy encampment'. Even fifteen years later when Kingston designed Ayers House — arguably Adelaide's finest house at the time, built for Sir Henry Ayers, probably Adelaide's wealthiest man — the architraves were a mere nine inches wide.

In January 1841 the Council purchased furniture worth £153.[82] This furniture does not appear to include the bookcase as it was not listed in the later auction notices of

74 Ibid., p. 39.
75 Ibid., p.135.
76 Ibid., p. 140.
77 Pike (1957), p. 231.
78 Langmead (1994), p. 135; Worsnop (1878), preface.
79 Adelaide City Council Archives, Minute book of the Mayor and Corporation of the City of Adelaide, p. 18.
80 Langmead (1994), p. 135.
81 Langmead (1983), p. 469.
82 *South Australian*, 10 September 1841 p. 2.

the CCA furniture, suggesting that no bookcase was ever delivered.[83] By 26 February 1841 many Government bills were not being honoured and the extravagance and optimism quickly disappeared. This was succeeded by Governor Grey's slash-and-burn fiscal policy. Consequently, the new Council rooms were never built.

Kingston had been used to verbal contracts such as those of Government House and the casual, if not absent, supervisory environment of the construction of the Adelaide Gaol. With Council money allocated for furniture for the new offices he was designing, Kingston may have taken it upon himself to engage a cabinetmaker to make the bookcase, before the building of the new Council rooms was cancelled. This would have allowed enough time for the bookcase to be partially constructed before the economic climate turned. Fiscal restraints were a novelty to Kingston and work on the cabinet may have been suspended in anticipation of the Council's finances improving.

Bell, who had largely undertaken government contracts, found his sources of income evaporate almost overnight. He sailed for Hobart in July 1841, establishing a cabinetmaking workshop in Brisbane Street.[84] The bookcase may have remained in his Adelaide workshop until he returned five years later to find that the CCA no longer existed, and the unfinished bookcase was no longer required. A new chapter in Adelaide's economy was unfolding, bringing large sums of money to be spent on more fashionable items.

Other evidence supports the Council hypothesis. Listed among an audit of CCA assets in 1841 is a drawing of a coat of arms costing £5, which may have been intended to be carved and set on top of the bookcase.[85] The only surviving records from the first CCA are the handwritten Council minutes, covering the entire period of its existence from 1840 to 1843. Characteristically, with few exceptions, the minutes omit details of the actions taken by the various Council committees. Contractors' names are recorded only when a contract was finalised and the contractors paid. Of the five commissions, the Adelaide City Corporation conforms to the circumstantial evidence most seamlessly by providing:

i. the means for it to be made: £250 of borrowed capital for furniture and furnishing in late December 1840;
ii. the occasion for the commission: plans for the new Council rooms;
iii. the reason for such a statement piece: the first municipal authority in Australia;
iv. the reason for the use of red gum (and not cedar): symbolic of place, i.e. South Australia;
v. the reason for the incomplete state of the bookcase: the collapse of the colony's economy and moribund finances of the Council; and
vi. the reason for a crest or coat of arms: the Council had purchased a drawing of a coat of arms sometime prior to 14 August 1841.

This conclusion is supported by all of the methods of dating described.

[83] *South Australian*, 8 May 1846 p. 2.
[84] *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 19 October 1841, p. 1.
[85] *South Australian*, 10 September 1841, p. 3.

WHAT OF THE RED GUM BOOKCASE?

Had the bookcase been a commission for a domestic setting its story may have ended here. But there are many enigmatic qualities to the bookcase that deserve explanation. What inspired Kingston to design what may have been his first piece of furniture? Why in Gothic, a style he had never worked in? Why such a colossal piece built so early in the colony? Why was it made of red gum?

Kingston, who was unrestrained by any formal training, may have referenced or emulated the deeply ritualised and symbolic world of the Freemasons for his design for the Council rooms. He was a founding member and Senior Warden of the Lodge of Friendship in London, later became the first Master of the Lodge in Adelaide and would have certainly understood the solemn use of symbolism. If the bookcase were intended for the Council rooms, its sheer size and bold architectural design might suggest that it was most likely to be a statement piece. But what statement would Kingston have wanted to make?

Kingston certainly had reason to be proud of his many contributions to the settlement of South Australia and later he was to express great pride in his achievements.[86] He was an ardent disciple of Wakefield's principles and understood that the conclusion of systematic colonization was self-government. This may have been foremost in his mind when he pulled out all stops to design the 'sumptuous' new Council rooms, the seat of the first democratic local authority in the British Empire in Australasia. Possibly this was to be his grand statement, perhaps even an ideological expression heralding the concluding stage of Wakefield's plan and the crowning achievement of the men of reform back in England, the utopia that they planned and worked so hard to set in motion, himself included.

The brief to design the new Council rooms would presumably have come from the elected council. Four members of this Council — mayor James Hurtle Fisher, treasurer John Morphett and councillors Charles Mann and John Brown — were all zealous advocates of Wakefield's plan and members of the South Australian Association in London along with Kingston. They would have understood the significance of the new Council and their part in its foundation and would likely have supported Kingston's desire to make a grand statement. So, despite the fact that Adelaide was not much more than a 'gipsy encampment' and the streets were barely recognisable as such, Kingston designed what was probably the largest bookcase in the country at that time (and possibly throughout the nineteenth century), as a statement, anticipating the final chapter of Wakefield's vision: self-government.

Kingston, for his first piece of furniture, chose Gothic, a style he had not previously used. This choice may simply have been because it had been declared the style appropriate for London's new democratic institution, the Palace of Westminster. Kingston would have been aware of the deeply rooted English emotional connection with the Gothic style, as described by Loudon in 1833:

> Towers, battlements, buttresses, pointed windows, mullions, and porches have been, from infancy, before the eyes of everyone who has been in the habit of attending his parish church; and, when-ever they occur in other buildings, they recall a thousand images connected with

[86] Langmead (1983), p. 148.

25 Unknown artist, *The Palace of Westminster on Fire*, 1834. The turreted gable is the House of Commons where Kingston had lobbied parliamentarians only months before the fire. *U. K. Parliament Art Collection WOA 1978*

> the place of our birth, the scenes of our youth, the home of our parents, and the abodes of our friends.[87]

This inherent quality of Gothic was not just of the people, but also of their governing institutions. This would have been ingrained in Kingston, who lobbied for the South Australian Act of 1834 on visits to that archaic Gothic building, the old House of Commons. Shortly afterwards he witnessed the catastrophic fire that destroyed the building in October 1834 (Figure 25). Public debate quickly began about which style Parliament should be rebuilt in, Neo-Classical or Gothic Revival. The 'most conspicuous and politically important architectural commission of the century' was awarded in February 1836 to the Gothic Revival design by Charles Barry and A. W. N. Pugin.[88] A month later, Kingston sailed for South Australia. The construction of the new

[87] Loudon (1833), p. 773.
[88] Lindfield (2016), p. 225.

Houses of Parliament began in 1840, the year the CCA was founded. Characteristically, Kingston did not choose the new 'pure' Gothic that Barry and Pugin were developing for the rebuilding in London but rather something much closer to the style that James Wyatt had used to restore the fourteenth century structure between 1802 and 1808.[89] The Gothic of Kingston's bookcase could well be referencing Westminster not just because it was the centre of democracy but also because it was, in an official sense, where South Australia was first founded with the passing of the South Australian Act in 1834.

In the absence of any recognizable pattern book references, we can only conjecture how Kingston arrived at the decorative aspects of design of the bookcase and what precedents he used. It would be well within Kingston's ability as an architect to take the quintessential elements of the Gothic of the old Parliament and apply them to Loudon's patterns (Figures 12 and 13). Langmead lists five architectural books Kingston was known to have owned before 1841, including Illustrations of the public buildings of London by Augustus Pugin and John Britton.[90] This book contains a chapter devoted to Westminster Hall complete with an illustration of its gable between two crenellated turrets. Kingston's lodgings in Dean's Row, Walworth were such that he would likely have passed the striking skyline of the Palace of Westminster every day to attend his work at the South Australian Association on Adelphi Terrace. The potent image of its burnt-out silhouette may have lain dormant in Kingston's mind until he first chose to try his hand at the Gothic style.

Red gum appears to be a conscious choice of timber. The earliest recorded use of red gum as a cabinet-making timber was January 1844. Kingston knew the timber was not suitable for cabinet-making, having observed as early as 1837 that South Australian timber was 'very heavy, hard and difficult to work'.[91] He may have stipulated red gum because it was representative of South Australia. Australian cedar, which is an attractive and easily wrought timber and readily available in Adelaide as early as 1838, would have been a more pragmatic choice, but it would have been seen as an import from New South Wales. Similarly, blackwood, another favoured furniture timber, would have been seen to be a Tasmanian timber.

KINGSTON, AUSTRALIA'S FIRST FURNITURE DESIGNER?

As previously stated, it is generally accepted that there were no furniture designers working in Australia in the nineteenth century, because furniture overwhelmingly followed precedents of furniture design from Britain. This phenomenon allows the connoisseurs of Australian colonial furniture to methodically consult British pattern and reference books to establish the origin(s) of design or influence, and place particular pieces in an established evolution of design and/or fashion. Could Kingston represent a deviation from this established view and be considered the first person to design furniture in Australia?

Presumably, the designs of a true furniture designer in colonial Australia, would be sufficiently inventive that they could be found not to have been derived from British

[89] Roberts (2003), p. 99.
[90] Langmead (1994), p. 263–4.
[91] Ibid., p. 114.

sources. At this point in time, no correlation can be found with regards to Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase. However, with Kingston's red gum bookcase it appears that he may have based its design on an engraving in Loudon's Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture. If this is indeed the case, the neo-classical pattern had been used simply as a proportional chassis upon which an elaborate and detailed gothic façade has been placed. Furthermore, the proportional chassis appears to have been made more complex by applying the primary and secondary breakfronts on plinth, waist and capital.

The gothic facade of the red gum bookcase strongly implies an architectural genesis, unlike the loose interpretations generally applied to furniture (Figure 9). This architectural genesis is even more prominent in Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase. The upper and lower doors are purely architectural with complex use of primary and secondary mouldings and weathered sills. As yet no British precedent for this design and construction has been found.

Perhaps a more critical and rigorous test of inventiveness, is the evaluations of those most familiar with the subject. The appearance of the red gum bookcase in 2017 with the auctioneer's proposed 1840s date precipitated a volley of contrary opinions from professionals well acquainted with colonial furniture. No consensus was found, with some even proposing dates as late as the 1870s. Discussions with numerous decorative art curators from both state and national galleries also revealed divergent opinions and ultimately, no action to acquire the piece. This response tends to reinforce the perception that the significance of Australian colonial furniture is based, most often, not on its originality, but on its strict adherence to the English form. The red gum bookcase's enigmatic form simply does not conform to the accepted convention or the aesthetic currency of colonial furniture.

The same can be observed of the 1848 Kingston cedar bookcase, but to an even greater extent. Australia's universally acknowledged authority on Australian colonial furniture, Kevin Fahy, published a date of the 1880s, and its place of manufacture as New South Wales.[92] It would appear that Kingston's designs had so radically deviated from the accepted convention of English derived design as to confound even those most intimately acquainted with the medium. The inference that Kingston's designs were ahead of their time by as much as four decades, adds weight to the argument that they were inventive and original , breaking with the accepted standards at that time. On these premises, I argue that George Strickland Kingston was also Australia's first genuine designer of furniture.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of George Strickland Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase facilitated a confident attribution of the red gum bookcase to Kingston and its place of origin and manufacture as Adelaide. This attribution is based on four details or qualities, very unusual, if not unique, in Australian furniture, that are common to both bookcases. These characteristics are the use of primary and secondary breakfronts, tri-clustered engaged columns and an overall height well over three metres. Additionally, both

[92] Fahy and Simpson (1998), p. 307.

bookcases have a highly inventive design uncharacteristic of English derived colonial furniture.

Numerous means of dating were used to establish the likely date of construction as the early 1840s, most likely during the period of economic expansion associated with Governor George Gawler (October 1838 to May 1841). Such a substantial and complex piece of furniture, made from a technically difficult timber, within four years of the settlement of Adelaide, is remarkable and without precedent in any other Australian colony. No conclusive evidence could be found to attribute a cabinetmaker yet in the absence of other credible alternatives, a wealth of circumstantial evidence favours Thomas Bell.

Of all Kingston's possible commissions which might have warranted such a piece of furniture, the Adelaide City Corporation best explains all the idiosyncrasies of the bookcase, including the occasion and means for its commission, emblematic use of red gum, incomplete state and the provision to display a coat of arms or similar device.

Although Kingston favoured the neo-classical style, he selected the Gothic style for the red gum bookcase. I suggest that this selection for the bookcase, with its crenellated gable and octagonal turrets, referenced the same details in the House of Commons (St Stephen's Chapel) in the Old Palace of Westminster, the place where South Australia, with its promise of democracy, was officially founded. I also suggest that the selection of red gum, despite its awkward unsuitability for cabinet-making was intended to be emblematic of South Australia.

The red gum bookcase is the earliest documented piece of South Australian made furniture known to have survived and the earliest known piece of furniture made of red gum in Australia. Its inventive design, along with the 1848 cedar bookcase, demonstrably supports the assertion that Kingston was the first designer of furniture in Australia. His designs manifest an originality not derived from conventional English sources: copies of imported furniture, émigré cabinetmakers or pattern books.

Little of Kingston's work survives intact today. Of Kingston's sixty-nine architectural projects, twenty-eight were houses, of which 'only eight remain and all have been altered, some almost beyond recognition'.[93] Significantly, the red gum bookcase, in its unaltered but incomplete state, along with Kingston's 1848 cedar bookcase, provide an expansion of Kingston's body of work from which he may be critiqued.

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[93] Langmead (1994), p. 183.

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