



*The paddle-steamer Murrumbidgee during the 1890s, when it was owned by John Egge*

## JOHN EGGE: A Champion of the Rivers

Morag Loh

IN Wentworth cemetery, not far from the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers, stands the grave of John Egge, simply inscribed with his name, his lifespan and two lines of verse. The visitor has no means of knowing that the man whose remains lie beneath the unpretentious headstone was in any way unusual. Yet John Egge was a legend in his lifetime and a remarkable pioneer — of a town and of an industry. One of the early residents of Wentworth, he was a key figure in the development of Murray-Darling-Murrumbidgee navigation and the river trade, which opened up the west of New South Wales to non-Aboriginal settlement.

Egge was born in Shanghai in 1829 or 1830 and left his native land as a crew member on a vessel

under the command of Captain Francis Cadell, a Scot who had been in China during the Opium War and was at the siege of Canton and the capture of Ningpo not far from Shanghai, where he may first have met Egge. Egge may have been present when Cadell visited Australia in 1849 in command of the *Royal Sovereign*. When the Scot returned in 1852, Egge was certainly with him and served on the two boats, *Cleopatra* and *Queen of Sheba*, with which Cadell traded between Port Adelaide and Melbourne.

Cadell's major interest at this stage was in the navigation of the Murray. William Randall had been the first to sail up the river by steamer late in 1853 and Cadell was quick to follow. Egge began working on Cadell's river-boats in 1854. He was a cook on



the *Albury* in 1855 when it reached the town after which it was named, the highest point on the river navigable by steamer; in 1856 he was cook on the *Gundagai*, the first iron steamer on the Murray; and he was both a cook and a steward on the *Lady Augusta*, a vessel Cadell had built in Sydney specially for the river trade.

During his first two years on the river Egge was known to passengers as John Bull and is registered in the wages books of the vessels in which he served under that name. We do not know how he came to be so called but it is possible that this name was imposed on him during a period in our history when colonised and conquered people, from Aborigines and Asians through at times to working class Irishmen, were denied full humanity and so their own or their full names. Certainly Egge's compatriot on the *Albury* and *Lady Augusta*, John Ling, was registered in the books merely as Sam Chinaman. We have not yet been able to discover Egge's Chinese name but in 1856 he chose a name for himself by deed poll, selecting the Scandinavian surname meaning 'harrow'. The reasons for his choice are still not known.

Egge very early displayed characteristics for which he would later become a legend — generosity and enterprise. Sarah and May Kerridge recounted in

their diary that when they were youngsters travelling on the river in 1856 they considered themselves lucky because the two cooks, Egge and Ling, so liked children that they wanted for nothing during the voyage. When the Kerridges reached their final destination at Lake Bonney conditions were very difficult and Egge, learning of this, visited the family, bringing gifts of patent leather shoes and sweets for the children. They remembered him warmly as 'our old friend'.

In 1856 Egge bought land at Goolwa and either bought or leased a property on Hindmarsh Island and took up pig farming in between spells of working on the riverboats. On Hindmarsh he met Mary Perring, an immigrant from Devon. Not having a boat, he courted her by swimming in the evening across the Goolwa Arm from the mainland, his clothes piled high on his head. Once on the island he would dress, visit Mary and her family and, when it was late, return to Goolwa in the same way that he had come. His determination paid off, for he and Mary were married at St Jude's Church of England, Port Elliot, on 8 April 1857.

In 1859 Wentworth was proclaimed a town and the first sales of crown allotments took place in March 1860. In that year John and Mary went to settle at Wentworth, working their passage up the river, John as a cook and Mary as a stewardess. Their first child, Richard, was among the seventeen children born in Wentworth in 1860.

In Wentworth Egge became a businessman, beginning in a very small way. He baked little pies and pasties in a camp oven and sold them in the streets and door to door from a basket he carried over his arm. In 1861, when he could afford a proper oven and a shop to house it, he opened a bakery. In 1863 he operated as a general dealer in partnership with an Elizabeth Botten and opened a butcher shop. He also had a boarding house constructed, a sound investment in an area with many single working men. Throughout this period he retained his land at Goolwa.

In 1866 or 1867 he chartered his first river-boat, the *Teviot*, and carried on a successful hawking business. This was his beginning as a river trader. He next chartered the *Moir* and in 1868 bought the *Endeavour*, an interesting example of pioneering enterprise, its top and sides being constructed of nail cans. It was one of the first boats to run regularly between Echuca and Albury and an American skippered it for Egge, who by now was employing as crew people he had formerly served as a cook and steward, including a member of the Kerridge family.

By the early 1870s Egge was established as one of the biggest traders on the Murray-Darling, a position he held right up until his retirement thirty years later. Over this period he owned and chartered at least six boats and three barges. His onshore business interests expanded at the same rate as his river trade and he ran at various times a general store at Wentworth, as well as a store on the wharf which supplied station properties with bulk goods and also served as a depot for his boats. He leased or owned four hotels over the years, held shares in various companies, owned residences in Wentworth and property in other towns along the rivers. The

John Egge in middle age





*Wentworth Federal Standard* regularly carried advertisements for his enterprises.

In 1891 Egge combined the styles of both onshore and river trading. His *S.S. Murrumbidgee*, originally built to transport wool and later adapted to take passengers, was grandly reconstructed as a floating department store with mahogany show cases and polished counters and both retail and wholesale sections. The grocery and hardware departments offered 'every conceivable article in these lines' but what was hailed as a new venture was the sale of boots and shoes, drapery and fancy goods. *The Federal Standard*, in a special article lauded the 'really magnificent stock . . . at prices so low as to be hitherto unheard of' and concluded 'The firm of John Egge and Co. are so well known that any further comment on the probability of the success of their scheme would be a task of supererogation'.

The riverboats, by carrying goods more cheaply than the overland bullock teams, were crucial to the opening up of the west of New South Wales for non-Aboriginal settlement. Household supplies went into the hinterland (as the primary products went out to their markets) for at least two-thirds, and sometimes a much smaller fraction, of the cost of overland transport. By offering household goods at regular intervals and reasonable prices the boats made life more tolerable for women. Indeed, they made possible the conditions under which women and chil-

dren could be brought from the coastal cities. By stocking almost every item of household use Egge catered particularly for the needs of families and extended the dimensions of the river trade.

Egge was in Australia three years before the gold rushes brought thousands of his compatriots here and was well established as a small landowner and river identity by the middle fifties. He was building up and expanding his considerable business interests at the very time when discriminatory legislation against Chinese had been passed. He suffered for a while from the poll tax laws which required him to pay £10 every time he crossed state boundaries but was eventually granted an exemption when the governments of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia consented to recognise him as 'an Australian merchant'. Nor did he escape the prejudice often directed at Chinese. His obituary in the *Adelaide Observer* noted that he 'stoutly repudiated any effort to place him in the alien class'.

Egge was, however, hugely popular and highly respected all along the rivers. Contemporary newspaper reports describe him in glowing terms — 'highly reputable', 'Wentworth's most popular resident', 'without a single enemy', 'an old friend'. When he left Wentworth in 1888 to live for a period in Adelaide, Wentworth's citizens, led by the town council, presented him with a valedictory address, signed not only by the mayor and aldermen but,

The captain, John Egge, with the crew of the *Murrumbidgee* in the 1890s. Alongside him is the supercargo, K. Anderson; back row, Ted Egge (mate), H. Massey (fireman), a deckhand and engineer whose names are unknown, and Billie Long (cook)





other town notables, including justices of the peace, solicitors, the doctor, postmaster, and customs officer. It read:

Dear Sir,

On this eve of your departure from the Township of Wentworth, We, the undersigned, on behalf of our fellow townsmen desire to place upon permanent record the fact that the severance of your connection with this District is viewed by all classes of the community with feelings of deep and sincere regret.

After a residence amongst us extending over a quarter of a century, We can truly say, without fear of bestowing undue adulation, that a genial kindly disposition, a character noted for its integrity of purpose and a hand ever ready to be stretched out in aid of the needy and suffering have earned for you an amount of popular esteem which falls to the lot of few men and of which you may justly feel proud.

In reluctantly bidding you farewell it is a pleasure to us to assure you that you carry with you the respect and esteem of all with whom you have come in contact coupled with their heartfelt wishes that a well merited period of prosperity may await you in the new sphere of life upon which you are about to enter.

We are Dear Sir  
Yours Faithfully

The testimonial was accompanied by a gold ring in which was set a large diamond surrounded by twelve smaller ones.

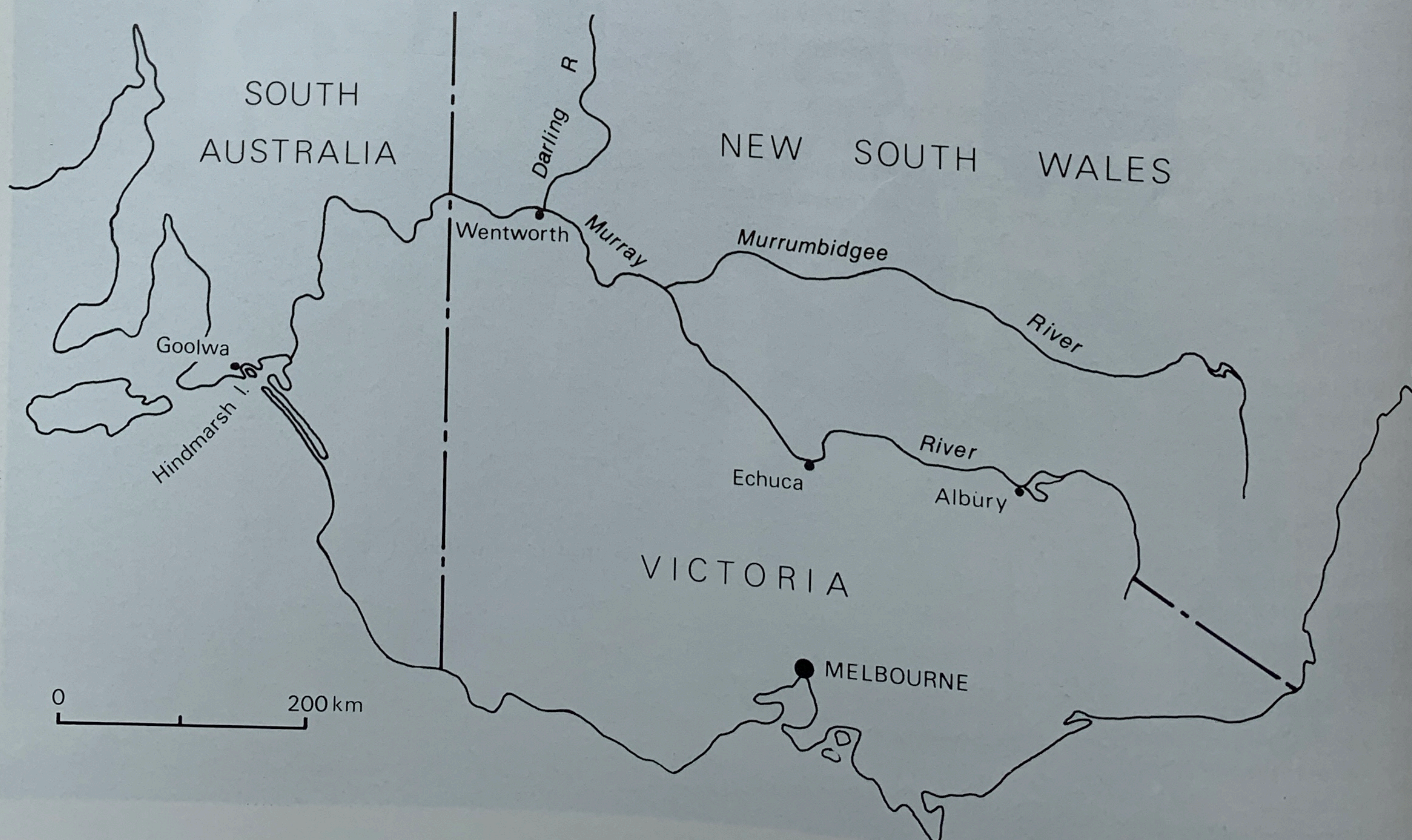
While Egge's integrity, generosity and business acumen inspired admiration, there were probably other factors which explain public esteem for him at a time of anti-Chinese feeling. Certainly Egge, unlike most of his compatriots, was not a sojourner. He decided very early to settle here and put his Chinese background aside in order to succeed. His early acquisition of land, his change of and choice of name and his total adoption of European clothes

all point to this. While it is almost impossible to believe that he could have forgotten his mother tongue, he spoke it so little that the *Observer* could write that he 'knew little or nothing of the Chinese language'. Egge made every effort to assimilate.

In addition, he fitted well into the tradition of the rivers, a rough, knockabout world where skippers could and often did work as hard as their men, could turn their hands to many tasks and where the man who was tough, both physically and mentally, was much admired. Egge was a match for anyone, having proved his worth as a labourer, farmer, cook, steward and businessman before becoming a skipper, and as capable as any of the occasional spectacular escapade, as when, during a high flood, he sailed his boat, the *Prince Alfred*, down the main street of Wentworth.

Hard-headed and shrewd, as an employer he commanded respect. Water to wash down the decks was obtained by lowering buckets into the river and on one occasion a careless crew sent so many buckets to the river bottom that Egge, in exasperation, told them they would have to pay for the loss. The crew disputed this, arguing that as they knew exactly where the buckets were, several feet below on the river bed, that they could not be considered lost. Egge said nothing more and the crew congratulated themselves on their wit. But when pay day arrived Egge told them that he had no money for them. Not that they should worry, for it wasn't lost; he knew exactly where it was. They could have it as soon as they replaced the missing buckets.

There is evidence that Egge drove a hard business deal and tradition has it that customs officers regarded him as a wily trader, who had all kind of tricks to avoid paying duty. Not all his business ventures





went smoothly, for the *Federal Standard* over the years carried accounts of numerous court cases in which he was suing or being sued for non-payment of bills. Perhaps this litigation explains the origin of one of his favourite sayings — 'I'm ten pounds sorry. How sorry are you?'

One tradition of the rivers in which John Egge excelled was 'the treat', when crews and skippers gave their time for community causes. Egge's generosity was legendary and well recorded in the newspapers throughout the area. All religious denominations, sporting clubs and social groups used his boats for fun and fund-raising, with dances on board, evening cruises, picnics, and weekend outings. His reputation for giving free rides to stranded or penniless bush workers earned him gratitude that was repaid during the shearers' strike of 1894. Strikers camped on the riverbank attacked boats suspected of aiding station owners or carrying scab labour and one, the *Rodney*, was burnt. Egge's boats not only passed unchecked but were cheered mightily from the time they came into view until they disappeared from sight around the next bend. Egge's obituary in the *Federal Standard* noted that he '... earned and retained the utmost respect and goodwill on all sides and the working men, in particular, thought much of their old friend'. Egge, with his resourcefulness and generosity, his sense of 'fair go', exemplified many of the characteristics of outback manhood idealised in much Australian history and literature.

When he died in September 1901 Egge was mourned by the whole of Wentworth, who remembered him as a popular identity and as a pioneer. The *Adelaide Observer* wrote that 'His industry contributed largely to the development of the river trade'. Despite the downturn in trade during the hard times of the 1890s and the encroachment of competition from the railways, Egge continued to believe in a bright future for the rivers and supported Federation, which would put an end to the duties that bedevilled the traders.

I wonder how Egge would have regarded that other aspect of Federation — the Immigration Restriction Act, which effectively excluded Chinese as settlers in Australia and resulted in a drastic decline in the population of Chinese and part Chinese from around thirty thousand in 1901 to about nine thousand in 1946, only three thousand, seven hundred of whom were Australian born. The fifty years after Egge's death were a time of isolation for many Chinese and their descendants.

Egge's four sons and three daughters who survived him melted into the communities in which they lived and as the railways replaced the river-boats the skills some of his sons had acquired as rivermen had to be discarded, though all of them showed adaptability and turned their hands to a wide variety of occupations. With the decline of the industry Egge himself was no longer remembered so much as a pioneer but as a river 'character'. One of his great-grandsons, a blue-eyed six-year-old in the 1920s, could not understand why some of his classmates called him 'Chow' from time to time. He was an adolescent before he learnt about John Egge and his relationship to him. Thirty years after Egge's



The great-great-grandson of John Egge, Geoffrey, setting off with a friend on one of his many canoe trips along the Murray River to find out more about his ancestor

death Chinese ancestry was a disadvantage in a country town on the very river whose navigation and commercial development a Chinese had helped to pioneer.

It was Egge's great-great-grandson, Geoffrey Egge who, in 1970, at the age of twenty and in more tolerant times, began the laborious task of tracing John Egge's history. Taken to visit the family burial plot in Wentworth cemetery when he was a child of ten, his imagination had been roused by what his mother told him of his interesting ancestor. For seven years he spent his leisure time searching for information about John Egge with a tenacity and enterprise not unlike Egge's own, even undertaking two long canoe trips, each of roughly two thousand, four hundred kilometres, along the Murray, interviewing people whose families may have known or remembered Egge. On his untimely death in 1978 Geoffrey Egge's family placed his ashes in John Egge's grave, finding some comfort in the fact that he shared a resting place with the man of whom he had become so proud and with whom he wished, increasingly, to identify.

The material Geoffrey Egge gathered has been the basis for most of this article and family and friends have added to it information Geoffrey did not have time to collect. Copies of it will be placed in the State Library of Victoria. In this way we hope to ensure that the contribution made by John Egge to Australia's development will be remembered with respect and that this man, held in such wide esteem and affection during his lifetime, will not be forgotten.

The author is an oral historian, who has written several books, one of which, *Children in Australia* (in association with Sue Fabian), was reviewed in *Hemisphere*, July/August 1981.