THE SIGNIFICANT PAST IN AUSTRALIAN THOUGHT

Some Studies in Nineteenth Century Australian Thought and its British Background

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Preface

In conceptual terms the aim of this thesis is relatively straightforward and unproblematic: to investigate which aspects of the human past had meaning, relevance and value for nineteenth century Australians, and thus, in the phrase preferred in the thesis, constituted their significant past. Yet, although the task is not difficult to define, it is far from easy to accomplish. The first difficulty is lack of direct access to the thinking of the large majority of the population who left no written records of their thought about the past, or about anything else. Almost by definition those who were prominent in public life or in authorship were atypical of people as a whole.

The second difficulty is that during the nineteenth century the Australian colonies constituted, despite their penal origins, a highly open society in Popper's sense, not only utterly different in that respect, as in most others, from the closed societies formed by Aboriginal groups which previously held sway, but also very different from most other past or contemporary societies, in which traditional patterns of thought about the past changed very little from generation to generation. An integral part of their openness was the very real possibility of deciding which past traditions and ways of life to retain and which to discard. This is not to suggest that nineteenth century Australians could, if they wished, simply start anew as though the past had not been. Some aspects of the past might, indeed, form part of a damnosa hereditas, even if all wished to bury and forget them completely. For the historian or political analyst, the more open the society, the more difficult is it likely to be to make defensible generalizations about the thought of any hypostatized group, let alone of the society as a whole.
Yet this difficulty has the compensating advantage that, where disagreement and dispute exist, ideas and values are likely to be much more explicitly expressed than in more closed societies. It is also reasonable to infer that the freer are publishing and elections, the more likely it is that choice of reading matter and of political candidates who offer manifestos and programmes will reflect the thoughts of those who read and vote.

A third difficulty is that thinking about the past does not fit neatly into a single scholarly discipline, even history. Literature and much of religious thought and engagement form for many people a more central part of what they value and find significant in the human past than do the fate of nations or of political movements. A determined effort has been made in the thesis to show the overlap and interpenetration of thinking about the significant past in the worlds, so often compartmentalized by scholars, of explorers, poets, novelists, politicians, theologians, historians, anthropologists and educationists. In addition, even the small penal settlement in which the new Australia had its origins contained a massive and complex legacy of historically-rooted ideas and institutions. The British cultural legacy included powerful Biblical and Christian elements, together with important classical influences - the Bulletin's campaigns during the last two decades of the century against direct British influence and the dead weight of the Biblical and classical past were testimony to their continuing vitality. This legacy continued to be further reinforced or modified by ongoing immigration and cultural transmission from Great Britain and Ireland. In particular, the increasing rejection during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the value of non-European ways of life, whether those held to be
civilized but decadent, or supposed primitive and savage, and of decadent societies or those of primitive and savage ones, and of the relevance of their history or culture, was powerfully injected into nineteenth century Australian thought, reaching its zenith in the White Australian policies of the Federation period. The attempt made here to relate the pre-Contact structure of British thinking about the significant past to nineteenth century colonial experience, as well as to relate to each other strands in that experience usually considered in isolation, is fraught with the danger of excessive diffuseness. It is difficult for the author to be certain that the danger has been avoided.

The thesis does not provide exhaustive accounts of the thought of the people chosen as representative, but it is hoped that each study illuminates important aspects of men or movements which have been neglected or ignored. There are large numbers of excellent monographs on Australian politicians, divines, writers, etc. and on specific areas or layers of Australian society, but problems of synthesis, except by means of procrustean a priori categorization, have, if anything, increased recently.

In the thesis no privilege is offered to any particular standpoint among the many which were represented in nineteenth century Australia. One of the main ploys in cultural and political struggle was to try to define one's own group as truly Australian, and others as not so, or at least less so, and in such contests the fight was at least as much about interpretations of the past as about rival visions of the future. The attempt has been made to give fair weight to all individuals and groups who made a public impact on the way in which Australians thought about the past and accorded it significance.
Because of the very real danger that one's own preferences and pre-conceptions may distort historical understanding, nineteenth century Australians have been given full opportunity to speak for themselves. It is because of a determination not to quote out of context that the thesis has become somewhat lengthy, not because of prolixity of authorial comment.

Perhaps the thesis needs to be defended against narrowness as well as against excessive breadth. It has been fashionable to claim during the 1980s that Australia is not only a multicultural society now, both in the trite sense that nearly a quarter of the population now has its origins outside Great Britain and Ireland and in the wider sense that the hundred or so ethnic languages and cultures represented in Australia have a powerful influence on public life, law and government, but was so a century or more ago as well. In this study there is no treatment of any of the nineteenth century ethnic minorities, although members of each of these certainly had a different conception of historical significance from that of the mainstream society. This omission is not the consequence of indifference, let alone contempt, for the Germans of the Barossa Valley, the Italians of the North Queensland sugar fields, or the Chinese of the gold rushes or the Chinatowns: it is simply a recognition that they played no part in the shaping of public thought and discussion about the significant past, although, particularly in the case of the Chinese, their historical role, was very much at the centre of contention. Similarly the relatively low representation of women in the thesis simply reflects the cultural reality of nineteenth century Australia, despite its pioneering status in votes for women and in their admission to many previously male preserves.
Attention is given to pre-Contact Aboriginal thinking about their non-mythical past, or, rather, to the reasons for why there was little of such thinking and to the massive gap between Aborigines and new Australians in the conceptualization of the structure and history of the world and of the place of man in it. More attention has been given to nineteenth century ideas about the place of the Aborigines in history, to critical experiences which themselves soon became part of the significant past, and to Aborigine responses to British colonisation.

Aborigines were increasingly on the margin of the minds of most Australians; much more central in late nineteenth century Australian thought was the relationship of the British colonies to the parent British culture. Apart from significant minority interest in American history during the years when demands were being advanced for full internal self-government, the main historical questions concerned applications of and adaptations to British institutions and thought to Australian conditions.

The two main centres of opposition to English political traditions were Irish-Australian Catholicism and radical republicanism, but in public debate each of these relied largely on arguments from within the British tradition. Roman Catholics found few arguments for religious equality or for the toleration of error in their own traditions, and few examples in avowedly Roman Catholic states. Radicals and republicans were divided as to whether the main evil in the British political tradition was that the State was too powerful and oppressive, and should be opposed on libertarian grounds, or too weak and inefficient to be able to combat social injustices effectively. Every effort has been made to ensure that a representative range of nineteenth century Australians is considered in the thesis.
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