

Radical History in Australia: A Model for Canada?

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Radical History in Australia:

A Model for Canada?

Gerald Friesen

Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, eds., 4 vols., *A People's History of Australia since 1788: Constructing a Culture; Staining the Wattle; Making a Life; A Most Valuable Acquisition* (Victoria: Fitzroy 1988).

AUSTRALIANS AND CANADIANS have an instant appreciation of the others' environment and international position. Both nations, of course, lived in the shadow of the empire established by Great Britain in the 19th-century and that of the American empire after 1940. Most of their citizens speak English, many of their recent immigrants have been recruited from the same European and Asian countries, and their parliamentary and federal institutions seem instantly recognizable to trans-Pacific visitors. Their economies, based on the export of primary products from farm and forest and mine, also seem familiar. So do the party systems. The universities seem to have been built on comparable intellectual foundations, first British and then American. For labour historians, the prospect of dealing with a literature based on Burke and Mill, Marx and Morris, and that takes for granted footnotes to E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman must make the prospect of scholarly visits for comparative purposes relatively attractive. And yet the links between the scholarly literatures, especially the historical writings of the two countries, are few. These volumes will provide a useful and stimulating introduc-

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tion to Australia for those Canadians interested in the insights provided by international comparisons.

The effort to learn about Australia will be repaid. Australia is home to a vigorous and rigorous scholarly discourse. It also possesses historians accustomed to ideological debate. Both the 'left' and the 'right' are more clearly defined than in North America. As in England, there is a strong labour history tradition and a large contingent of socialist and marxist social scientists. As in the United States, there are numerous historians trained in liberal graduate schools. What is interesting is that the two factions wage a continuing battle for control of the campuses and even of public discourse. History finds its way into the large contingent of Australian magazines, into the 'quality' newspapers, and into the speeches of public figures. The 1984-85 debate over Australia's economic future, in which comparisons with Argentinian experience became commonplace, were interesting for their use of international perspectives, and the same could be said, though they did not reach a comparable level of sophistication, about the 1989 discussions of the Australian place in a Japan-dominated Asian economy. In each case, the assumptions and reasoning of the opposing faction were exposed to searching criticism by adherents of the other intellectual perspective.

In an age preoccupied by international comparisons and global currents, the quest for appropriate standards of measurement is no idle ramble. The experience of Canada, like that of Australia, is often obscured by the dust raised by our 'close and powerful friends', (the phrase is that of Robert Menzies, Australian Prime Minister and ideological counterpart of George Drew). Students of the smaller countries must learn to stand some distance from the centre of the whirlwind if they wish to see clearly the patterns of experience in their own peripheral lands. I am not disparaging the study of imperial capitals and empire policy. In the case of Canada and Australia, one external priority has always been British history and, more recently, the history of the United States. But a second level of priority must be to learn enough about comparable nations to understand what is unique and what is common in the histories of the globe's hinterlands. For Canada, the most appropriate and readily-understandable foil is Australia.

The bibliography of Canada-Australia comparative studies is neither long nor encouraging. Neither country can claim to have devoted much attention to the history of the other. Readers of *L/Lt* have received only three reviews of Australian books, one scholarly article on an Australian subject that had special resonance in Canada, and one review article on the state of Australian labour history. This last essay, however, is worth recalling.

"Australian Labour and Labour History" by Eric Fry, former editor of that country's *Labour History*, appeared in *L/LT*, Volume 12 (1983), and is a useful introduction to the subject. Fry's outline of Australian labour historiography demonstrates why it is so different, and so much stronger, than Canadian. He notes the important labour histories that appeared before 1960, most of them socialist or marxist in tenor, and the relative failure of a liberal tradition or a bourgeois school

of national history to dominate the conventional wisdom about Australia's past. As a consequence, the creation of a labour history society and journal in 1960 anticipated the boom in Australia-centred scholarship in that decade and actually led national history in the definition of subjects and themes. Populist in approach, nationalist in expression, progressive in sentiment, this generation of labour histories paid close attention to developments in British scholarship though it was ambiguous in its ideological underpinnings. All this changed in the 1970s. A new group of historians, influenced by the debates among European marxists, attacked the imprecision of the social democrat-marxist popular front during the preceding decade and encouraged the discussion of class identity, world economic 'systems', and the language of culture. In this debate, the new subjects of social history — women's history, aboriginal history, South Pacific imperialism — also received attention. Then the sails of the "First Fleet" returned to haunt the inhabitants of Port Jackson, Sydney.

When the Australian scholars turned their attention to the forthcoming celebration of the bicentenary of the first fleet's arrival, (1788-1988), they parted company over the nature of a quasi-official history project similar in intention, though not in structure, to Canada's centenary Series. The critics, who were not happy at the prospect of a "sophisticated form of celebratory history" (their words), decided to assemble a "people's history." Burgmann and Lee began the editing process in 1982. Their goal was a critical history. They wished to emphasize that European settlement began with dispossession. A dominant theme in the story would be inequality. Another would be the degree of control exercised over their own lives by those "outside the magic circles of power and influence." The audience for this history would be the people themselves. And the purpose, as the editors declared, was "to suggest that we can not only interpret the world in new ways, but also use the knowledge to change it."

This people's history comes in four installments. One volume examines the "structural" basis of social violence and racism. It asserts the class-based origins of white Australia and places the responsibility for social injustice and racial conflict on the holders of power. A second volume deals with how people fed, clothed and housed themselves, raised children and secured a living. The individuals' experiences with gender, the household, and the workplace take the foreground here. A third deals with popular movements of opposition against the dominant class and the barriers to the success of such resistance movements. And a fourth discusses culture, especially inter-ethnic relations, the regulation of expression by the state, and the re-direction of popular expression by capitalist enterprises. This is an ambitious agenda. Its very structure illustrates the sophistication of historiographical approach, the range of radical historians' interests, and the intensely political character of historical writing in Australia.

Though the volumes are not numbered, the foundation for the series seems to be provided by *A Most Valuable Acquisition*. It focuses first on aboriginal Australia, then the convict origins of white society, the many variations on the themes of

immigration and ethnicity, the emergence of an Australian "empire" in the south Pacific and, finally, war as a source of national definition and of national misunderstanding. One theme of the volume is that racism and inter-racial conflict, including inter-racial violence, are part and parcel of the past two hundred years in Australia. In the key essay, Jenny Lee argues that the relationship between mother country and colony, Britain and Australia, provides an epitome of the national experience. Even if Australians enjoyed living standards higher than those in Britain and Europe, she writes, they and their families lost much because of their place in the social and economic structure of empire. Australia was locked into the role of exporter of primary products; British financiers controlled the flow of investment; local manufacturing was primitive and vulnerable; in each of the key economic areas — sheep, mines, railways, urban development — there were problems. Most of the problems, including concentration of ownership, male-dominated frontiers, aboriginal dispossession and unequal gender relations were direct consequences of the external economic control and the class system which was its creation.

The ostensible purpose of the volume is to inquire why Europeans have lived in Australia and how they have exploited its resources. Thus, the land is seen as "a dumping-ground for convicts, a sheep-walk for the benefit of British industry, a convenient source of cannon-fodder." The white community is described as one that kept itself in comfort "by excluding other races." Behind the exploitation and dispossession was not simply white racism, however, but something more pervasive: "White Australia was, and is, a class society. We need to look towards the real source of power within it to uncover the responsibility for social injustice and racial conflict." So say the editors in their Introduction and so goes the volume itself. Which side won in the contest for profit between mother country and colony? In arguing that there was no monolithic winner, Lee suggests that a few individuals became wealthy and that many households were caught in an exploitive, self-defeating struggle for survival.

The second volume, as I imagine the editor's design, offers a fascinating combination of household or gender issues and work place or work process issues. The balance between household and workplace has changed, the editors argue, and wage labour has assumed tasks formerly reserved for unpaid family members. The consequence is a shift in the role of women and children in society and a "new phase in the history of capitalism." How to tackle such themes? Start with the home: a history of food from salt pork to takeaway; a history of clothing as "one of the means of domination in society;" a history of shelter for those who do not own their own homes; a history of the public sector transportation systems; a history of health, the basis of which is the probability of untimely death; a history of public and private welfare systems. In a valuable synthesis, Marilyn Lake asserts that a central theme in colonial Australian history is the dependency of women. These circumstances were partly the product of the social organization of production and reproduction, partly of the male exclusiveness of unions. Such circumstances

forced women to work "a double shift" and they created a society in which men and women "inhabit different cultures: theirs was the intimacy of strangers." The volume then turns to the workplace and the working family, examining households in times of depression, employer-employee relations, unions, compulsory arbitration, and work relations in several industries. The strongest article is Peter Cochrane's survey of work processes under the strain of technological change, which asserts the "possibility of socialist organization of work." *Making a Life* is a stimulating book. By juxtaposing work and gender, the editors have illuminated the working lives of men and women in a way not usually available to labour or gender studies. Not surprisingly, much of the material is directly relevant to Canadian scholars.

Staining the Wattle is an unconventional political history. The subjects of these histories of political movements include gay men and lesbian women, the women's and green and unemployed movements, Communists and aboriginal rights activists, and anti-war and anti-bomb campaigns. In short, politics is interpreted as a contest between those with and those without power, as expressed by organized movements. Naturally, organized labour and the Labor Party come in for special attention as bases for hope and obstacles to change. Verity Burgmann and Stuart MacIntyre provide a measured analysis of the matter in "Divided We Fell." They do not shrink from criticism of both the unions and their political spokespeople; they quote with approval the admission of a Labor M.P. that it was difficult to take up radical causes in parliament and his comment that, in the end, "we either go right or go cranky." But Burgmann and MacIntyre conclude on a more optimistic note by arguing that the interests of the workers are "compatible with the interests of the social movements. All share a common objective of liberating humanity from oppression, inequality and ultimate self-destruction."

The volume on *Constructing A Culture* is similarly stimulating. It contains papers on schools, crime, prostitution, madness, gambling, churches, temperance and sport, each of which offers a survey of the national experience. It then proceeds to subjects that might seem more properly "culture," including the media, humour, writing, music, the visual arts, and radical intellectuals. Imagine a Canadian counterpart! These papers are useful as models, not just as means of establishing a perspective on the Canadian experience. They offer concepts that are helpful — "cultural cringe" and "cutting down tall poppies," for example — and they make generalizations that sound strikingly familiar. Thus, according to John Docker, since the 1920s Australia has had a "split culture ... in radio and television between the A.B.C., (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), which looks to the B.B.C. and British high culture, and commercial stations, which look to American popular culture. It is a deep split corresponding to a tension between class cultures, and any account of Australian cultural history must ponder its significance." In the most wide-ranging of these papers, Andrew Milner selects three streams of intellectual radicalism, socialism, feminism and nationalism, in modern Australia. Milner concludes that, "If the inequalities of race, class and gender that exist in Australia

and the even more horrific inequalities that exist internationally are ever to be reduced, let alone eliminated, then that will not be brought about by specialist groups of radical intellectuals. Rather, it will be achieved by the efforts of those masses of people who themselves pay the price, in human misery and suffering, for the continued existence of structured social inequality." These are stimulating essays, in short, and deserve an audience in Canada.

In recommending these four volumes to Canadian historians, I am conscious of the fact that they present "popular" rather than scholarly articles. Moreover, as is inevitable, they are mixed in quality. The seventy essays may be written by scholars and based upon appropriate principles of scholarly synthesis but they contain no footnotes and precious few references to differences of opinion in the historical literature. Nonetheless, they are challenging and broadly representative, as far as I can tell, of critical thought in Australian historical circles. And, for those who are determined to go further, each essay is accompanied by a brief bibliographical note.

Whether the volumes will ever contribute to the reshaping of Australian society is not for me to say. Certainly, whatever their uses in union halls or critical discussion groups, they will make the task of dissenting teachers much easier. The very design of the questions around which each volume is organized represents an important contribution to national historiography. That seven dozen historians could then be chivvied into completing brief pithy essays along the desired lines might leave Canadian scholars envious or incredulous but it should also cause them to reflect on their own attempts to exert some influence upon the direction of public debate. Certainly, I leave these volumes convinced that we have much to learn from the Australian example. I feel a sense of place and national debate in these books that may have driven Canadian historians at one time but does not appear among us with the same intensity today. I observe in these essays an appreciation of the international context of the nation and of scholarly inquiry that is too often lacking in our writing. And one cannot help but be impressed by these historians' determination both to communicate to the non-professional or lay readers in their communities and to set out a coherent synthesis upon which ordinary Australians can base their reflections on politics and community life.

One lesson for Canadians, I think, concerns this need for synthesis. What is the essence of a national story? Burgmann and Lee and their colleagues were determined that self-congratulation not be the only theme in Australia's bicentenary celebrations. They were convinced that a study of "well-heeled, white, Anglo-Saxon males" would offer only a tiny part of the people's history. They wanted to emphasize that the myths of national progress and national unity were misleading and that most citizens — Aboriginal people, women, members of ethnic minorities, the working class — would not receive adequate treatment in celebratory volumes. Hence the focus on inequality. Balancing this negative was a positive: people can affect the course of history. Hence the focus on 'agency'. The editors wanted to "encourage people to think critically about the imagined com-

munity of the Australian nation." And, they concluded, "If we think about it for long enough, we might decide to ... open up the doors and windows and let in a bit of fresh air." A convincing and authoritative synthesis permits the expression of such ambitions.

In a land where popular history is dominated by the likes of Peter Newman, for whom personality and sensationalism constitute the essence of interpretation, and where able and respected critics like Pierre Berton remain unmoved by radical histories, the absence of critical historical syntheses has impoverished discussion of public issues. Canadian historians have a lot to learn about creating a concerted critical discourse, not least from their Australian counterparts represented in this People's History.

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