MELBOURNE: AN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

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I would like to begin by apologizing for the poverty and inadequacy of the performance. What I have tried to do is to pay a tribute to the contribution of Professor Crawford to the intellectual history of Melbourne. I have tried to see this as a historian. I fear many of you will disagree both with my history and with my estimate of his place in that history.

As we are concerned tonight to honour one man’s very great achievement it will, I hope, be appropriate to begin with a quotation from a work which will live as long as men listen to ‘what the heart doth say’. I take this from Lev. Tolstoi’s Anna Karenina. Anna is talking about love to the mockers and sceptics of Moscow society, and to Vronsky, who is incapable of love: ‘I think,’ she says, ‘so many heads, so many minds, and so many hearts, so many kinds of love.’ It is the same with colonial societies and their intellectual history—so many colonial societies, so many kinds of intellectual history.

Think for one moment of the differences between North America and New South Wales. In response to their historical situation some Americans developed the myth that whereas all Europeans were victims of the Fall, and were in that sense the sons of Eve and her transgression with Adam, Americans were the sons of Lilith. As such they were the innocents—the unspotted ones, the ones without sin, the ones without evil. Hence, it was argued, they had the power to create a way of life in which men would neither hurt nor destroy. Men such as Hawthorne and Melville, who were brought up in that myth, took one long, agonised look at human behaviour, and decided there was something wrong with the American myth. The result was the creation of HESTER PRYNNE, the Reverend DIMMESDALE, and Captain AHAB (i.e. these Americans concluded that ‘the hearts of the sons of men are filled with evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead’). The gap between myth and experience led them to contribute to one of the central questions in human life, to break out of the provincial into the universal, and consider the problem of human evil. Hawthorne, Melville, Parkman, James and Faulkner lifted up the Americans to the questions which were considered by AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES, SHAKESPEARE, DOSTOEVSKY, TOLSTOY and HARDY, and contemplated the tragic fate of man.

It was quite different in the early history of New South Wales, where because of a quite different historical situation men were confronted not with a gap between a myth and their experience of life, but by the conflict between the native born and the emigrants, which developed into a clash between two moralities, the morality of the native born and the morality of the Englishman. This was exacerbated by a clash over the ownership of land, in which the Englishman or the colonial Anglo-Phil behaved with a supercilious arrogance and haughtiness towards the native born, and the native born developed xenophobia. If you like to put it in another way, the native born became a philistine and a provincial.
The literature reflected the historical situation. So, while the Americans were celebrating their AHAB, their ISABEL ARCHER, and the English their JUDE FAWLEY and CLYM YEOBRIGHT, New South Wales created Mitchell and Steelman—characters which touched the colonial provincial situation but were not concerned with the universal problems of mankind.

Let me interpolate one point. I do not wish to suggest that there were not scenes of tragic grandeur in the early history of New South Wales—or confrontations which raised the big issues of life. There most certainly were. Think for one moment of those men who gathered under the gum trees at Sydney Cove on the morning of 7 February 1788, for the first ceremony in the history of European civilization in Australia. We know that most of them had been 'much elevated' the previous evening in a great drunken debauch to mark the landing of the women convicts. Those men were beginning what others had dreamed of doing for a thousand years and more—creating civilization in the great south seas—the Hindus had dreamed of the islands of gold, the Chinese had dreamed of a land dedicated to the Holy Spirit. Yet on that day in February Phillip harangued the convicts on the consequences of transgressing the laws of their native country, and warned the men that if they entered the women's quarters, they would get a charge of buckshot in the back-side:

Between the conception  
And the creation  
Falls the shadow.  
Life is very long.

Or consider the sentiments in Phillip's mind when the Lady Juliana arrived in June 1790 just in time to rescue the colony from starvation. There were warring elements in Phillip's clay. On the one hand there was the high mindedness, and inner dignity which attracted both white man and black man to his service. On the other hand there was that darker side which had possibly caused him to make a disastrous choice for a wife, and to declare that all those who were guilty of murder or sodomy should be eaten by the Maoris. Think for a moment of the thoughts of such a man when he read these words in the first despatch he received from his superiors in London: '... His Majesty is graciously pleased to approve of your conduct in the execution of the arduous and important service which has been committed to your care'.

Consider, too, the confrontation of Protestant and Catholic during the early period. The Protestant upright man who believed his religion had created the highest civilization known to man, confronted in Sydney and Hobart town the poverty stricken, superstitious, priest-ridden Irish Catholic convicts who, despite persecution, an ancient wrong against their people, and the appalling squalor of their lives, had kept alive the image of Christ and the Holy Mother of God, and, with that, a compassion which was outside the range of the Protestants. The civilization of New South Wales and Tasmania was enriched by this confrontation, and instructed by all the examples of human folly and madness which it provoked. But by the 1820's all these issues were overshadowed by that other confrontation between the native born and the Englishman which provided the setting for the early intellectual history of New South Wales.
Yet Melbourne escaped most of the consequences of the conflict between the native born and the English. For Melbourne was the child of a clean different historical situation from Sydney. Intellectual life in Melbourne developed during the golden age of the bourgeoisie in Australia—the period from 1861 to 1883. The intellectual debate in Melbourne was concerned with a universal problem—the effect of science on religious belief. *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and with the publication of the *Descent of Man* in 1871, Melbourne became caught up in the discussion of whether the descent of man from the apes had toppled his uniqueness in the scheme of Creation. By the 1870's the intellectuals in Melbourne were discussing the life of man without God.

Let me introduce this discussion by reminding you of an incident in the life of *Dostoevsky*. After one of his many disastrous appearances at the gaming tables of Baden Baden he wandered into the Gallery, and stood for a long time in front of Holbein's *Descent from the Cross*. What he thought of might be assumed from the two discussions of the scene in his novels—the *Idiot*, and the *Possessed*. Let me read you the extract from the *Possessed* where Kirilov is talking with Peter Stepanovich of the life of men without God:

‘Listen to a great idea: there was a day on earth, and in the midst of the earth there stood three crosses. One on the Cross had such faith that he said to another, “Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise”. The day ended; both died and passed away and found neither Paradise nor resurrection. His words did not come true. Listen: that Man was the loftiest of all on earth. He was that which gave meaning to life. The whole planet, with everything on it, is mere madness without that Man. There has never been any like Him before or since, never up to a miracle. For that is the miracle, that there never was or never will be another like Him. And if that is so, if the laws of nature did not spare even Him, and have not spared even their miracle and made even Him live in a lie and die for a lie, then all the planet is a lie and rests on a lie and on mockery. So, then, the very laws of the planet are a lie and the vaudeville of devils. What is there to live for? Answer, if you are a man.’

‘That’s a different matter. It seems to me you’ve mixed up two different causes, and that’s a very unsafe thing to do. If the lie were ended and if you realized that all the falsity comes from the belief in that former God?’

I am concerned this evening with the people who put the question: if the lie were ended, what then? I am not concerned with the ones who continued to believe—who were sustained by the image of Christ, and for whom the laws of the planet were not a lie, and life not a vaudeville of devils. I am concerned with those in Melbourne who were prepared to answer as a man: what is there to live for—assuming, as Nietzsche put it, that God is dead. A number gave an answer to this question. Some were frivolous, cheeky, and shallow. They asked such questions as: did Adam have a navel? or, did Adam have to call an ape Dad? Marcus Clarke, for example, in his pamphlet ‘Civilization Without Delusion’ which was published in 1878, suggested that as organized religion had so dismally failed to make men moral, men should at least try morality without religion. Bishop Moorehouse, who had a lively sense of the importance of full employment for the clergy, replied that there could not be morality without God and his clergy! After this display of colonial cheek others took up the question more seriously.
Among these I would mention George Higinbotham, who in a lecture on Science and Religion in Scots Church, Melbourne, in 1883, whispered (as he put it, because if you spoke aloud on the subject you risked vilification by priests and parsons) to his fellow laymen, that they drop such discredited fallacies as original sin, the virgin birth, and the resurrection, and meet on what he called ‘the high central platform of thought’—belief in God as taught by the man Jesus. After Higinbotham even God disappeared from the discussion. Bernard O’Dowd, in his poetry, addressed himself to the question; what sort of life is open to men after they have killed God? and he answered with a courage and dignity befitting the majesty of the question:

‘That culture joy and goodliness
Be th’ equal right of all:
That greed no more shall those oppress
Who by the wayside fall:
That each shall share what all men sow:
That colour, caste’s a lie:
That man is God however low—
Is man, however high.’

For this he had to endure undying ridicule and contempt from the gaolers of mankind, both secular and religious.

The other answer of some stature was given by Joseph Furphy in ‘Such is Life’. As you know this work is set in the Riverina, and in it you will find, appropriately enough, a discussion of what I have called the New South Wales problem—the clash between the morality of the native born and the Englishmen, conducted with much more sophistication and at greater depth than in the stories of Lawson. You will also find a serene faith in the capacity of men to lead a good life here on earth without the fear of eternal punishment or the hope of eternal bliss. For what sustained Furphy was a vision of life redeemed by education, refinement, leisure and comfort—of the revolt of enlightenment against ignorance—of justice and reason against the manifestation of the manifestly unworthy. That is to say he was concerned with the same question as KIRILOV in The Possessed: once you have lost faith in the God who became man, you see in man the power to become like God—i.e. men seeking for the attribute of their godhead. In this way Melbourne began to contribute towards a universal problem of mankind—the life of man without God. By an odd irony this Melbourne answer was given at a time when Sydney, after sloughing off the provincialism, the philistinism, the race prejudice and the sentimentality of Lawson’s creed for the native born began to put forward its own answer to the life of man without God. Sydney because of its different historical situation came under the influence of Nietzsche just as Melbourne became a child of the Enlightenment. So from Brennan, Lindsay, and all the present generation influenced by the Sydney version of Nietzsche, their intellectuals became Dionysians, followers of Apollo, believers in self realization, in culture for the few, and indifference to the fate of the masses, while Melbourne intellectuals were concerned with finding how ‘culture, joy and goodliness’ could be provided for all.

I said that the tone of intellectual life in Melbourne was influenced by the discussion of this problem of finding a secular faith for mankind. But there was one place in Melbourne where the great issues of the day were not discussed—
and that was the University. For one of the deplorable results of the secularization of education in Australia, and over a century of sectarian madness and folly by both Catholic and Protestant, was the silence of the Universities on the great issues of the day. There were exceptions such as W. M. Ball, who in the 1920's and 1930's excited a whole generation of Melbourne students in the future of mankind. I also do not wish to imply that Melbourne did not have scholars; indeed in men such as Professor Chisholm and Associate Professor Lodewyckx they had men of international reputation. So, do not assume there were not giants in the land in the days before the flood! But it was the remoteness of most of the teachers from the intellectual climate of the day which gave much of the teaching in the Arts Faculties the same quality Tolstoy detected in his Professor at Kazan—he was like a deaf man who went on answering questions no one had put to him.

But one Monday in March 1937 the twenty odd students who had the great good fortune to attend the first lecture by the new Professor of History, R. M. Crawford, in the old History Class Room, knew at once that those days of unleavened bread were over. I remember the occasion as though it were yesterday. The subject was European History A, and the topic for that morning was the barbarian invasions of Europe. Not that the topic mattered very much, because most of us came to realize later that we had begun a journey that morning that will be remembered as long as men take interest in the intellectual history of this country.

I mean most of us realized that we had had the great good fortune to come under the influence of a great teacher—i.e. a man who addressed himself to the great intellectual questions of the day, who communicated to us the excitement of the chase, and presented the memorable pictures. I remember, for example, the creation of the scene at Worms in 1521, and the speech by Charles V—indeed so much that I wove it into the first volume of a history of Australia! I remember, too, a remark thrown off during a lecture on the Mediaeval Papacy about Thomas Hardy and happiness, which made one not only see how important Hardy was in the history of European thought, but that in Hardy there was a vision of life which one must sample. And what a revolution to hear a man speak of Hardy with passion and insight!

But, you may ask, what did he have to say? What answers did he give? I can say quite simply that no answers were given. We were introduced imaginatively and sympathetically into the minds of the mighty dead. Looking back, I suspect that Professor Crawford became a great teacher precisely because he was still searching for the answers. It is the divided ones, the ones who thirst to believe, and who are sceptical of all belief, who believe in the perfectibility of mankind, and yet perceive that the hearts of the sons of men are filled with evil, who become the great teachers.

This, then was the man who enthused a whole generation of students by carrying on the Melbourne tradition—who excited them by posing the questions of the day: such as—if bad conditions have made men evil, will good conditions make them good? or—is it possible to bring culture to the masses without a loss of standards? or—is it possible to have greater economic and social equality without loss of liberty? Those were the questions in the foreground, but if you listened attentively you were aware of the setting in which these questions were
being put. If you listened you could hear what Matthew Arnold in Dover Beach called:

>'The Sea of Faith

Was once too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle surl'd.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar...

In some ways it was like seeing the last few minutes of Chekhov's play Uncle Vanya. You remember Sonya is declaring her faith, how all the suffering, the misery and the cruelty which men experience on earth will be intelligible when they die, for then they will rest, they will hear the angels, and will be tender to one another. 'I believe, I believe,' she says, 'poor Uncle Vanya, you are weeping. . . . You have never known happiness in your life.' Uncle Vanya is weeping because he knows that what she is saying is untrue, but that it ought to be true. He, too, is a vaudeville of devil's man.

In this way the intellectuals taught by Professor Crawford were given something to say, and thus rescued from the scepticism and mockery which characterized other intellectuals in the new age of unbelief.

Having withstood the temptation to become sceptics and mockers, they, the students, found themselves confronted with the enormous temptation to seek recognition for their subject from the philosophers. This was, I believe, a most terrible mistake. As well might an Anglican ask a Catholic to recognize the achievement of the Authorized Version of the Bible or the singing of the psalms at St. Margaret's, Westminster, as a historian might ask a philosopher to recognize history as an intellectual activity of any importance. In the battle for recognition they, the students, sometimes succumbed to the darker temptation to talk about what it would be like to write history, supposing one were to write history, rather than to write history. Not all lost their way: there was one, I remember, who was inspired by the lofty vision communicated by Professor Crawford in 1937. She went on to write a social history of a stature similar to that achieved by our poets and painters. I am thinking of Margaret Kiddie's *Men of Yesterday*.

The other temptation for the students was how they would respond to the Catholic intellectual revival in Australia. At first sight this Catholic intellectual revival seemed to confront those brought up in the Protestant-enlightenment tradition with the unexpected. Those who were discussing the life of men without God were confronted somewhat to their surprise with those who looked for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. When Noel Ebbels was killed in a car accident five miles from Gundagi in 1951, he was going to a political meeting. Before Mr. Thomas was killed in a car accident in 1962 he had attended the Easter vigil in Newman Chapel.

Here indeed was a new confrontation in Australia—a catholicism liberated from serving the worldly inspirations of the Irish people, though faced with an even greater temptation to lead the forces of darkness in our society in a crusade against communism. Here was a Catholic humanism confronting secular humanism. Yet I venture to predict, at the risk of being derided as enigmatic, that anyone brought up in the Melbourne tradition would not view Rome confronting Moscow as an impasse, but rather as the beginning from which something momentous in the history of mankind might well develop.
You, sir, wanted us to view the world with wonder and delight. You made us believe that here in what Professor Hope has rather savagely described as 'the Arabian desert of the human mind', we might turn that flint stone into a springing well. And it is beginning to happen. The historian was more prescient than the poet. We are beginning to grow up. For you were inspired by a lofty and high-minded vision of the role of the historian: you saw the historian as one of the muses, and, as such, called to illuminate the human situation through the comic, the epic, and the tragic. You saw the historian still responding to the sacred charge delivered to the muses at Olympus:

Grant lovely song and celebrate the holy race of the deathless gods who are for ever, those that were born of Earth and starry Heaven and gloomy Night and them that briny Sea did rear. Tell how at the first Gods and earth came to be, and rivers, and the boundless sea with its raging swell, and the gleaming stars, and the wide heaven above.

You, Sir, were passionately convinced that history concerns the whole human race. That is why I believe it is appropriate to end by quoting from the same man with whom I began. On 23 September 1882, Tatiana Tolstoy wrote this in her diary about a day she had spent with her father: 'I was glad to spend the day with Papa,' she wrote, 'because when he is near I can sense clearly what is worth thinking about and worrying over, and what is not; what is important in life and what are trifles. I do not remember what we were talking of, only it was something about death, and Papa said that the world is like a river ... and the current carries with it models of fine or worthless people, good and bad and all sorts ... it's our duty to leave the pattern we want on that river.'

Sir, I believe that you have imposed a pattern on the river of our intellectual life which will live long after the crusaders for the eternal values of the West have been swept into the dust-bin of history.