

LOCAL, NATIONAL, GLOBAL: CLIO'S COMPLEX EMBRACE

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My abstract for this paper was as always hopelessly ambitious. I promised to address complex shifts in the subject matter and themes of Australian history over the last decade: the 'felling' of the tall national tales and the concomitant growth of small local, biographical stories; the validation of ordinary experience above political and intellectual aims and action. I will be considering some aspects of the first of those themes, with reference to two books recently published – both by Adelaide graduates in history: Jill Matthews's *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (2005) and John Hirst's *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (2005).

My thoughts about these books have been clarified by the observations of another Adelaide graduate, Angela Woolacott. In a collection of essays called *Connected Worlds* (2006) she describes a realignment of the field of world history in terms of a set of new concerns which she terms, approvingly, postcolonial and transnational, thus:

- an interest in the historical construction of race, gender and sexuality;
- a questioning of the power relations underpinning knowledge structures;
- a recognition that political, economic, social and cultural structures were constructed at once in colonies and their metropolises, in interconnected and interconstitutive ways; and
- a concern with the specificities of historical change as opposed to any universalist approach.

The categories raise useful questions about the works in hand without in any way containing them.

Matthews and Hirst are both telling stories engaging with Australian locality, the Australian nation and Australia's place in the world, but with very different understandings and meanings. Jill Matthews' study purports to be a story about a place, the city of Sydney, and conditions that shaped the experience of its residents across a bounded period of time, 'thirty tumultuous years of prosperity, between the two great depressions of the early 1890s and the late 1920s'. Matthews makes no bones about the fact that she was a big story to tell, though not overtly a national one. In her opening words: 'This is a tale of modern romance, of heroic adventures and impassioned desire'. Her heroes are on one hand show-business entrepreneurs and on the other Sydney's guardians of high culture, riding, as she says, under the banners of glamour and of civilisation in a struggle 'to determine the shape of modern culture and the possibilities of life in the modern city'. Her plot tells how the people of Sydney learnt both to enjoy and also to discipline the pleasures of moving pictures, radio, gramophone records and cheap magazines, and 'how in the process they forged an identity as modern Australians and modern citizens of the world' (1).

It is a big story told through a series of small ones. The curtain-raiser is the tale of the tango: born in the slums and brothels of Buenos Aires in the 1870s; carried to Paris in the first decade of the twentieth century by Argentinean

tourists armed with phonograph recordings and pianola rolls; desexualised and commercialised in America; danced passionately in the dance palaces of Sydney by 1913; and taken after the war by Australian exhibition dancers to the international circuits of Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and back to Europe and America. Across the world the tango was denounced as 'salacious, suggestive, commercial, immoral, American and modern' (4); everywhere 'it seduced ordinary dancers into a global community of pleasure and modern fashion' and everywhere it 'connected local advocates of reform to a global campaign to defend civilisation' (5).

Matthews' central proposition is that Sydney in the early decades of the twentieth century was not the provincial, inward looking city 'clinging to the edges of a vast and empty continent' as painted by nationalist historians, nor the loyal fragment of empire sketched by British imperialists, a lowly part of the 'great white imperial hierarchy' which guaranteed nevertheless Australian 'superiority over all other [non-British] nations' (8). Rather the city was a vibrant, self-confident, fully participating member of a global culture premised on the consumable pleasures of the new – machines and gadgets, fashions and amusements, mostly produced in America, and disproportionately consumed and practiced by young women. 'When a young Sydney woman sat in the dark at the Lyceum Theatre in George Street in August 1923 and studied intently the "flapper clothes, short, flimsy creations" worn by Gloria Swanson in *Prodigal Daughters*, she was in that moment linked to a global community in which the sharply drawn lines between nations, races, genders, creeds, ages and cultures were temporarily rendered fuzzy; she was part of a modern, cosmopolitan, global audience' (20).

In its concern for located specificity and global interconnectedness Matthews' approach to this moment clearly fits Woollacott's sense of the postcolonial and the transnational, though there is no identification of post-colonial relationships here; neither colonies nor metropolises. Perhaps Jill's vision should be understood as truly post-colonial in the sense of finally leaving the imperial behind. John Hirst's *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* is more clearly located in ways of understanding which Woollacott presents as the target of post-colonial criticism – though here too the fit is far from perfect.

Sense and Nonsense in Australian History is a collection of essays – some academic, some more simply polemical – published across a period of thirty years. Their targets are various – nationalists, feminists, multiculturalists – but their most constant concern is the need to understand the national within a global context. John declared in an essay that was very influential when it first appeared in 1984, and deserves to be again, that 'Our task as Australian historians is to understand a dependent culture... Our independence as historians will be achieved when we have developed the methods to cope with the dependence of our culture' (123). In this essay he proposes one such method: a dynamic application to Australian history of the ideas of 'the grand theorist of dependence', Louis Hartz, who argued that 'Europe's colonies of settlement are fragments of Europe whose nature and course are determined by the ideology which prevailed at the time they left the mother culture. So Latin America is a feudal fragment, the United States is a liberal, bourgeois

fragment, and Australia is variously a radical, proletarian or collectivist fragment'. Here is grand universalising narrative at its most ambitious. But Hirst proceeds to apply this 'method' by looking at the specifics of the histories of one institution which was not exported from Britain to Australia – the poor law – and three that were: mechanics institutes, friendly societies, and the labour party, finding in the process extensive explanatory power in a qualified version of Hartz's insight. I will come back to his treatment here of the local.

Woollacott's criticism of old-style global history seems to me to have more bite when applied to the shaping force and the limits of the historical tradition that Hirst claims for Australia. The essays in *Sense and Nonsense* were first published across a twenty-year period; the first appeared in 1975 and the latest was written for this collection. There is no attempt in this publication to order these chronologically, and indeed no need; the assumptions underlying the arguments do not change over time and if anything are stated more baldly in the later essays. John's understanding of world history remains precisely that which we both learned in the Adelaide department of History and Politics between 1960 and 1963. John spells it out in an essay written in 1993. 'At the beginning of his *Study of History* Arnold Toynbee asked whether English history of itself was an intelligible field of study. He decided that it was not, because England's history was so interconnected with that of other European countries, and with theirs had been fundamentally shaped by supra-national forces. England, he decided, could only be understood as part of Western Christendom ... Western civilisation is the intelligible field of study'. Hirst draws the conclusion that 'European civilisation is also the field of study for an intelligible history of Australia' (78) – and he proudly puts this into practice. 'I was appointed to La Trobe University to teach Australian history. I now teach a course on European civilisation beginning with classical Athens. I am still fulfilling my brief – I am introducing Australian students to their history'(79).

Toynbee's position is not supported amongst world historians today. It is generally argued that Europe's history itself is so interconnected with the histories of other empires, notably the Chinese and the Islamic, that it is not in itself 'an intelligible field of study'. Thus in the volume *Connected Worlds* Tony Ballantyne reports from as early as the 1950s the development of what he calls 'Eurasian history'. 'Whether the research focused on the development of long-distance trade, the expanding reach of Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, the interaction between nomadic and sedentary peoples, or the rise and fall of empires, historians of Eurasia highlighted the porousness of the boundaries that supposedly marked 'India', 'China', 'Central Asia' and 'Europe' and the interdependence of these regions prior to the growth of European maritime empires during the early modern period'(584). One might conclude that Australian students should include within 'their history' studies of the Islamic, Hindu and Chinese empires.

Hirst is however vehemently – polemically – opposed to this suggestion. Ballantyne recognises that the idea of 'Eurasian history' is consciously deployed against the assumed moral superiority and historical dynamism of Western civilisation. Hirst is committed to the defence of these propositions against what he sees as a multicultural assault. In a piece called 'Australia's

Absurd History' he finds at 'the heart of the multicultural outlook' 'the denial of any superior legitimacy to the host culture'(22). He dismisses impatiently the proposition that 'since in the schools building self-esteem is a primary aim, migrant children must see themselves reflected when they study Australian history'(71). Multiculturalists 'have no knowledge or respect for old Australia'; 'let them suspend operations until they learn what sort of people we are'(23).

You will remember that Woollacott identifies as a characteristic of the new, improved transnational history 'a concern with the specificities of historical change as opposed to any universalist approach'. The examples of Matthews and Hirst suggest that the problem is not the universalist approach per se, but rather the inclusions and exclusions of that universalism. And when it comes to 'the specificities of historical change', both historians can powerfully invoke the local to embody (and at once to modify) their grand narratives. Take Hirst for example, investigating Hartz' characterisation of the Australian colonies as a 'collectivist fragment' of British culture. He describes in careful detail the process by which workers unemployed in an economic downturn in nineteenth century Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide persuaded colonial governments to provide them with work, then draws the following conclusion.

'To say that central governments gave jobs to the unemployed on public works in Australia whereas in England local poor law guardians ran workhouses would miss so much. What could be more 'local' than the face-to-face encounters between ministers and the unemployed, the discussion and argument about particular job sites and wage rates, the invitations to deputations to call back tomorrow when the results of telegrams to contractors in the country would be known? Australian ministers dealing with the unemployed were not unlike the English magistrates who ran the old poor law, how had to deal with crowds complaining about the price of bread, who supplemented wages, and occasionally provided public works for the unemployed. The similarity is not fortuitous. In the special circumstances of Australia's founding, working men were able to maintain those rights to a decent living in their own land which the English poor lost in 1834' (132-3).

Or take Matthews' reconstruction of the living expenses of Alice Ward, a 22-year old kitchen-hand at Mark Foys Sydney department store and a witness before the NSW Board of Trade in 1918. Matthews itemises Ward's expenditure: 6s a week for a furnished room in Surrey Hills shared with the landlady's daughter – 'It was a back room, "very small; there is just room for two single beds, a combination chest and wash stand in the narrow passage between the beds"; 6s.3d. a week for meals; about 10s. a week for clothes – 'She wore her winter costume all year, but had to replace its components regularly, and all her clothes she bought on time payment. On Sundays, and some evenings, she went out, wearing her best dress, but her weekly budget included nothing for amusements'(69). Persistent questioning by the lawyer representing the employers elicited the fact that someone else paid for her evening entertainments. Details like these tell, as Matthews says, 'fragmentary stories of the everyday lives of working women in the process of becoming modern'(68).

These two extracts show their authors dealing deftly with the relationship between the local and the global (or at least the imperial). They are also nicely representative of the way that Hirst and Matthews deal with the middle category, the nation – or rather in Matthews' case, the way she avoids it. It will already be clear that while Hirst is properly dismissive of what he sees as Australian exceptionalism, he understands the role of Australian historians as explaining the development and current condition of the Australian nation. Matthews writes dismissively that 'the very form of each national story must pretend singularity'; that 'to sustain the context of globalism and cosmopolitanism in my stories of Sydney I explicitly relate them to a context wider than the singular nation'(10).

But the suppressed category doesn't go away. Matthews acknowledges that while the responses of Sydneysiders to modernity 'were not so different from those of people elsewhere, yet they told themselves that their story was uniquely Australian'(10). Within these responses she includes those of the group she calls the 'Heroes of Civilisation' – the educated elite who enjoyed many of the pleasures of the modern while fearing the modernity of popular culture as consumerist, vulgar, American, and ultimately destructive of that British heritage which was Australia's true destiny. Not only do her characters imagine themselves as modern Australians – Matthews herself can slip into this mode. Thus from describing Sydney as a city of immigrants she moves to characterising 'British-Australians' as particularly open to ideas of the modern because they were 'unsettled settlers, a people whose history was movement'(9).

Which brings me from Sydney to Adelaide. My parents were quintessential Australian moderns in the Matthews' sense – born in Adelaide to 'unsettled' parents whose grandparents were born in Launceston and Albany and Port Pirie, devotees of the Charleston and all forms of modern technology, anti-consumerist and anti-American, and certain that White Australia stood as a bastion in defence of Western civilisation. Matthews' story about the making of modern Sydney is wonderfully convincing, but she – or someone else – still needs to do the same for the rest of modern Australia.