

THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES IN AUSTRALIA—A BRAVE NEW WORLD?*

By A. G. L. SHAW

IN the traditional account of the history of Australia the decade of the nineties is regarded as one of the major periods of change, comparable to the gold rush or either of the World Wars, for example. More recently historians have become increasingly critical of the accuracy of dividing Australian development into water-tight compartments. In the latest general history of Australia¹ is pointed out that most of the important features of the gold rush period could be seen, in embryo at least, before 1851; and though it would be agreed that both World Wars had a tremendous effect on Australia, it is arguable once again, that the industrial expansion to which they gave rise was merely hastened by their outbreak, and that socially and politically again they only accelerated the development of forces already at work. The critical historian has been at work on the nineties too, arguing that the appearance of the Labour Party as a political force was not the result of the strikes of 1890, but merely the coming to fruition of forces long working in industrial circles, and that the industrial upheavals of the period were not in fact as epoch-making as has often been alleged.

With all this one may in part agree, though with the reservation prompted by the query "when does acceleration mean change?" In other words, may it not be argued that a sudden and considerable acceleration, even of existing forces, does in fact constitute so considerable a change in a society as to justify ones describing it as a major landmark in that society's development? Be that as it may, it does appear to me that there was much that was "new" in Australia in the nineties; that although much of this had roots or origins in the past there *was* a major transformation in Australian social and political life between 1890 and 1900, so much so that one is entitled to speak of a "new world" emerging, though whether or not it should be called "brave" will depend, as always, on one's point of view.

In discussing this period, it seems to me that its most striking feature was the economic and financial crisis which began about 1890 and reached its climax in the autumn of 1893. I think it difficult to overestimate its disastrous effect on the community, and hence its stimulus to new lines of thought and action. In this I must disagree with the view expressed by Vance Palmer in his book *The Legend of the Nineties*² and developed by Professor Ward at a previous meeting of this Association.

* An address delivered by A. G. L. Shaw, M.A. (Oxford), B.A. (Melbourne) on 2nd August, 1956, as part of a series "The Legend of the Eighteen Nineties in Australia".

¹ *Australia, A Social and Political History*, ed. G. Greenwood (1955).

² Melbourne University Press (1954), p. 73

They argued that the crisis itself was soon over, and that then the public works and private buildings which had been constructed in the orgy of financial extravagance of the preceding boom remained, that these physical assets were not destroyed, and that therefore the crisis, though sharp, was of less significance than has sometimes been thought.

This view seems to me a mistaken one. Though it is true that the public works remained, that they were not destroyed as by a bombing raid, the psychological effect of the crisis remained also, to colour political and economic thinking for a generation. It was especially vivid in the minds of those entering on adult life and faced immediately with the task of surmounting economic difficulties. (This was to occur again in the experience of the economic depression of the 1930s.) It is, I think, important not to underestimate the extent of the unemployment and poverty of the time—then largely unrelieved except by private charity, and one must remember too that such was the extent of insolvency that poverty spread widely through the community, that many homes of the middle class and even of formerly wealthy people felt its onslaught and almost every economic activity, save the most essential to life, came to a standstill. Even the sober pages of Coghlan³ testify vividly to the prevailing distress, with their repeated assertions of unemployment and poverty, and the contemporary press naturally enough paints its picture in more vivid colours. The *Melbourne Age* in a series of articles in the winter of 1892 describing the suffering of the working class, refers to “the iron grip of dire necessity”, which after two years was showing “no sign of relaxation” (in fact it was going to get worse in the next twelve months); it describes how “want and semi-starvation stand gaunt and inflexible” in working class suburbs, where “the forlorn and destitute were cowering in garret and cellar like hunted animals”. To meet pressing needs furniture was being sold, houses were left bare; everywhere was “wretchedness and misery in unwholesome rooms and crowded garrets”.

Nor was distress confined to the unemployed. It is difficult for us to visualise the extent of the insolvency of mushroom companies, whose wreck deprived so many of their savings. For many of the bankrupt institutions had accepted funds not only from the ordinary investing class, but from small depositors, who put their savings in “banks” of dubious standing, and in some cases found them “tied up” by the closure, either temporary (for reconstruction) or permanent, of even important, and therefore presumably sound, financial institutions. After all, nine of the twenty banks in Australia suspended payments during the crisis, including four of the five with head offices in Melbourne, and important banks like the E.S. & A., the London Bank, the Commercial Bank of Australia, the National Bank of Australasia, and the Bank of Victoria, were forced to shut their doors. “In no previous crisis”, wrote *Table Talk* in November, 1892, still six months before it reached its worst, “have well-to-do tradesmen and artisans and the respectable middle-class been so heavily involved. Nearly everyone has had some interest in the collapsed building societies

³ T. A. Coghlan: *Labour and Industry in Australia* (1918), Vols. iii and iv.

or financial institutions improperly called "banks" and their savings, in whole or part, were lost".

The depression was worst in Victoria, where the preceding boom had been the biggest and the most prolonged, where speculation had been the most "optimistic" and where the consequent bankruptcies were most widespread. Between 1892 and 1900, 114,000 persons left the colony to seek other homes; the population of Melbourne fell from about 500,000 to 450,000 between 1892 and 1894; employment in factories in Victoria fell from 54,413 in 1891, to 34,268 in 1894, and unemployment was also heavy in the building trades and those formerly employed on public works. No wonder, with "capital unobtainable", and commerce "completely stagnant", there was, as Coghlan puts it, the "greatest gloom" in the colony.

But although Victoria was the worst, all the colonies, except Western Australia (which was booming following the recent discoveries of gold at Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie) were depressed. In Sydney there were 26,000 unemployed, "at least". Factory employment fell from 51,000 to 42,000; building ceased to such an extent that only 4,000 of the 15,000 members of the Building Trades Union were working at their proper occupation, so that, according to Coghlan, the "greatest industrial depression prevailed". And in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania the situation was very similar. Imports per head of population fell from £20 13s. 7d. per head in 1890, to £12 6s. 8d. in 1894; and bank assets, between 1891 and 1901, declined in New South Wales from £54,000,000 to £43,000,000, in Victoria from £63,000,000 to £41,000,000, in Queensland from £20,000,000 to £16,000,000 and in South Australia from £11,000,000 to £6,000,000. And as Coghlan has stressed, "one of the most remarkable features of the crisis was the lengthened time over which it extended". It began in 1888, and was at its worst only in 1893, and it was not until 1895, that there was any marked sign of improvement. However, despite the drought of the next few years, the situation steadily got better. Agricultural development and recovery was helped by the railways built in the boom, and by Farrer's experiments in wheat breeding. The gold fields of the West offered employment to those who could get there. Recovery was well on the way. But the memory of the depression remained to affect political and economic policy for decades, and it gave immediate stimulus to those who wanted to prevent a repetition of such a disaster.

The desire to create a new and better world was, of course, not new. An almost permanent feature of human aspiration, it had developed markedly in Australia in the eighties with the feeling that here, in a new country, was the opportunity to build a Utopia, free from the cramping restrictions and traditions and inherited evils of the Old World. Vance Palmer speaks of the "idealistic upsurge" of the period, asserting the "dignity of the common man" in a challenge to the European "spirit of feudalism"; moreover the "discovery of Australia" between 1870 and 1890, and the realisation of its potentialities (without as yet a true appreciation of their limitations) gave rise to a "fervent and fanatical belief in Australia's future".

This spirit is most notoriously reflected in the Sydney *Bulletin*, although in some ways its effect can be misunderstood or exaggerated.⁴ On the whole it lacked a clear social policy, except for its ambition to be an "organ" and its emphasis on Australian nationalism, but its influence was heightened by its disrespect for tradition, its pungent political comment and the very great skill and brightness of its cartoonists. However, the emphasis on and the growth of Australian nationalism was itself important. Professor Hancock⁵ has emphasized the importance of the artists—such as Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton—at Heidelberg, Victoria, and Mosman, New South Wales, in helping the Australian to discover his country by expressing upon canvas a direct enthusiastic vision of her blue distances, her light and her colours. They so created a vision of another part of Australian nationality, and an increasingly common attitude is reflected in Bernard O'Dowd's *Auster Rampant*:

Antipodean ? Whew ! We are the head,
The oceanic head—while you, slung low
With lands that scrape the floor of heaven, gaze
Far o'er the Bull your old Europa wed
Up to the Chambers of the South, where glow
Our pennant stars, our wider Milky Way.

Dr. Wilkes has shown the limitations of Australian literature in this period, and has emphasized that most of the writers were of "minor literary talent" and the two major figures, Furphy and Lawson, are most memorable as writers for "that part of their work that least reflects the temper of the age"; but whatever the merits of the contemporary writing as literature, for the historian it is important as an indication of the outlook of the times.

The optimism of the eighteen eighties with its buoyancy and bombast appeared in two different ways. On the one hand, the speculator and capitalist hoped to exploit the opportunities at hand and assist the development of the country on orthodox lines. But this group was naturally somewhat blown out by the collapse of 1890-1894. On the other hand, there appeared the opportunity, already mentioned, to mould Australian society more directly for the benefit of the working man. Such a feeling was naturally strengthened by the depression, but it was more the product of the preceding boom. These Utopian dreams were largely disappointed, and it is probably their failure, in comparison with the high hopes of the time, that has led some historians to overlook the very real achievements that were accomplished between 1895 and 1900. But certainly in 1890 radical thought was widespread. At the beginning of the eighteen eighties, Coghlan points out, the working classes had "accepted with little question the existing conditions of society; at its close they were seething with discontent, and fully determined by one means or another to

⁴ Cf. Dr. Wilkes' paper in this number and see A. G. Thomson, "The Early History of *The Bulletin*", in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 6, no. 22 (1954), p. 121.

⁵ W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, (Australian Edn., 1945), p. 253.

alter the relations of labour and capital", though as the phrase "by one means or another" implies, they were by no means agreed on their methods or objectives but were interested in a variety of competing panaceas. It was a "time of mental upheaval and of intellectual re-adjustment", wrote Black, in echoing the hopes of *The Bulletin* that "to solve the problems over which the oppressed masses of the European nations are now poring in vain is the destiny of Australia".⁶

Some of this radicalism was political, giving rise to republican doctrines and the desire for isolation. More significant in the economic field was Henry George, the prophet of San Francisco, who visited Australia in 1890, to receive, according to Coghlan, "a respect that almost amounted to veneration", and in the opinion of W. M. Hughes, then in his radical days, "captured the imagination of thousands".⁷

William Lane, though preferring Marx, recognized the appeal of George:

. . . Karl Marx struck deeper than George, and earlier, but Karl Marx only wrote for the school men and the enthusiasts through whom his theories are filtering slowly down while George wrote in the language of the people for the people and with a force and fire that only one of the people could feel. . . All reformers, individualist and socialistic, go with him so far as to agree that the land must be nationalized; for the popularization of this proposition there is not a man living who has done as much as Henry George.

and in a pamphlet by Frank Cotton appears a Messianic note:

In the darkest periods that the world has ever seen . . . amidst stagnant and decaying civilizations . . . there has always come to the rescue of humanity, in some form or other, the hero, sage, or reformer . . . such men were Mohamet, Luther, Cromwell, Kingsley . . . But tonight I propose to speak, not of dead heroes and sages, but of . . . Henry George, hero, sage, and "The Prophet of San Francisco" . . . Such as Charles Kingsley, Thomas Carlyle, Paxton Hood, and John Stuart Mill . . . bent their giant intellects to the task of solving this problem of the persistence of poverty amidst increasing wealth . . . but in vain was their toil . . . Where the workers of Australia but united, we could, in these lands of ours, lay the foundation of a new and greater civilization . . . with want destroyed, with greed and avarice changed to noble passions, with the clamour and din of class and creed hushed by the full acceptance and acknowledgment of our common birthright . . . with every force that science and art could give us, we might sweep onward and upward to reach at last that Kingdom of

⁶ See B. Mansfield, "The Background to Radical Republicanism in New South Wales in the 1880's", in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 5, no. 20 (1953), p. 338 *et seq.*

⁷ See F. Picard, "Henry George and the Labour split of 1891", in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 6, no. 21 (1953), p. 47 *et seq.*

God upon earth, which the greatest of all democrats, the purest of all socialists, Jesus of Nazareth, taught his disciples to work, to pray, and if need be, to die for "The Reign of the Prince of Peace".⁸

Here seemed one method of achieving reform. Another lay in the growth of Trades Unions in the period and their extension from the skilled crafts, especially in building where combination had long existed, to the shearers, the miners, the water-side workers. "The union", wrote W. G. Spence, one of Australia's greatest unionists, represented "the first step", taken by the intelligent worker towards securing better conditions of life; and its arrival brought "salvation from years of tyranny".⁹ Coupled with industrial action was political action, for recent researches by B. Nairn in New South Wales, and J. Phillip in Victoria, have suggested that the origin of the political labour party is to be sought further back than is traditionally believed, that it was not the product only of the strikes of 1890-1891 (though it was stimulated by them), but that projects for political action were in train long before.¹⁰

But not only were the hopes and strivings manifested in orthodox political action. William Lane, in Queensland, dreamed of more radical, more revolutionary action to establish a Utopia, and he was by no means alone. One of the spokesmen of such hopes was Henry Lawson, friend of Lane, member of the Australian Socialist League, and in many ways, in the view of Lloyd Ross, the "symbol of the inarticulate dreams of struggling mankind".¹¹ It is true that Lawson's "social" verse is trite as literature; and the sentiment of *Faces in the Street* seems to us over done:¹²

They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
That want is here a stranger, that poverty's unknown;
And cause I have to sorrow, in a land so young and fair
To see upon those faces stamped the marks of Want and Care;
I look in vain for traces of the fresh and fair and sweet
In sallow sunken faces that are drifting there in the street,
I can sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.

But trite or not it was popular, and played an important part in arousing public opinion, along with the writings of men like Francis Adams, Bancroft Boake, Ernest Favenc and others, the preaching of *The Bulletin*, *The Boomerang*, and *The Worker*, or the more sophisticated social analysis of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹ W. G. Spence, *Australia's Awakening* (1909), p. 431-33.

¹⁰ See June Phillip, "1890—The Turning Point in Labour History?" in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 4, no. 14 (1950), p. 145 *et seq.*, and an unpublished thesis for the degree of M.A. in the University of Sydney by B. Nairn on the History of the Labour Movement in New South Wales.

¹¹ L. Ross, *William Lane* [1937], p. 5.

¹² Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 6.

Lawson cared little for the critics of his English :

You were quick to pick on a faulty line
That I strove to put my soul in
Your eyes were keen for a dash of mine
In the place of a semi-colon . . .
And Blind to the rest . . .

I leave you alone in your cultured halls
To drivel and croak and cavil
Till your voice goes further than college walls
Keep out of the tracks we travel.

Social reform was his object, not necessarily literary elegance, and to achieve it, he was ready to preach revolution if necessary.

The wealthy care not for our wants, nor for the pangs we feel
Our hands have clutched in vain for bread—and now they clutch for steel !

And again,

So we must a rebel flag
As other did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song
And join in rebel chorus,
We'll make the bankers feel the sting
Of those that they would throttle,
They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle.

This growth of radicalism was not peculiar to Australia. Arising probably from the " Great Depression ", as it was then called, in England and Europe, a period of ten years when, according to Marshall at Cambridge, " a greater number of people have been unemployed than in any other consecutive ten years ",¹³ radicalism and socialism were active in England too. This is the decade (the eighteen eighties) which saw the rise of New Unionism, the formation of the Socialist League, the Social Democratic Federation, and the Fabians ; on a slightly different plane the resurgence of the Irish Home Rule movement ; and in the United States of America the spread of the Grange, the American Federation of Labour, not to mention Henry George himself ; the growth of the European Socialist movement ; and the growing social conscience of the middle and upper classes, reflected for example in the " unauthorized programme " of the English Liberal Party whose authorship was by no means confined to Joseph Chamberlain,¹⁴ or in the Papal Encyclical, *De Rerum Novarum*.

¹³ J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, Vol. 3 (1938), p. 5.

¹⁴ See G. H. D. Howard, " Joseph Chamberlain and the Unauthorized Programme ", *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, Vol. LXV, No. CCLVII (1950), pp. 477-491.

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As in Australia, there is a revolutionary side to this movement, wherein for example we find William Morris echoing the fervour of Lawson.

Hear a word, a word in season, for the day is drawing nigh
When the Cause shall call upon us, some to live and some to die,
He that dies shall not die lonely ; many a one hath gone before
He that lives shall bear no burden heavier than the life they bore.

At the funeral of Linnell, killed in the Trafalgar Square demonstration in 1888, Morris put forward his hopes.

Our friend here has had a hard life, and met with a hard death ; if society had been differently constituted, his life might have been a beautiful and a happy one. It is our business to begin to organise for purpose of seeing that such things shall not happen, to try and make this earth a beautiful and happy place.

This reformation might be achieved peacefully but it seemed unlikely. "What lies ahead of us is rougher work than languid constitutional agitation", he said, and arguing that "society seems mere cannibalism", he saw hope "on only one direction . . . on the road to Revolution".¹⁵

But though Morris was by no means alone in his revolutionary ideas, not all reformers were revolutionaries. Certainly not the English liberals, or the Pope, and in fact not even a large element in the Socialist movement. For if this is the period of growing socialist thought, it is also the period of the Erfurt programme of 1891, when the German Socialist Party, the most powerful in Europe, decided, while maintaining their ultimate Socialist objectives, to press for immediate demands for political and social reforms. "The entire tone of the new programme", says G. D. H. Cole, "is that of a party with a Socialist ideal towards which it proposes to advance through far-reaching reforms to be achieved by constitutional action".¹⁶ The "revisionists" in Germany, the "Mensheviks" in Russia, the Fabians in England could all co-operate to a greater or less extent with Radical-Liberals, and in most European countries the period witnesses a considerable expansion of social reform.

This expansion has its parallel in Australia, and herein lies the justification of the title of this paper. For the revolutionary utopian dreams of the 1880s faded in the decade following ; but stimulated by the depression and the strikes, middle class progressives were ready to join with moderate labour in bringing about a series of important social reforms. These immediately did a great deal for the working man and gave promise of great beneficial development in the future, and made Australia, for the time, a pioneer in many aspects of social reform.

¹⁵ I am indebted to an unpublished paper by B. E. Mansfield on William Morris and his influence on the Australian Labour Movement.

¹⁶ G. D. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought, Marxism and Anarchism 1850-1890*, (1954), p. 431.

The programmes of the Labour Party indeed showed no great originality ; they were intended to raise the standard of life of the working class and were largely borrowed from colonial progressives. Moreover the party was prepared for bit-by-bit reform. " We do not ask ", said *The Worker* in Queensland, " that all our political programme be set in operation at once . . . We cannot expect to realise a perfect collectivist state in our day any more than the follower of Christ can hope to establish in his time, ' on earth peace and good-will ' . . ." ¹⁷ But the policy of gradualism was very successful, and it was not long before a visiting French observer could describe Australia as the country of " socialisme sans doctrines ".

Although it would not be true to say that there was no social legislation in force in the Australian colonies before 1890, or that the state had in no way abandoned a laissez-faire policy, certainly state interference was on a small scale. Only Victoria had an effective Factory Act, and that did not regulate outwork, or apprenticeship. During the nineties extensive social reforms were introduced in all the colonies. Following the revelations of the Anti-Sweating League, the Victorian Parliament passed the amending Factory Act of 1896, which not only tightened up existing regulations and for the first time established effective control over apprenticeship, but introduced the unprecedented system of wages boards to fix wages in those occupations where the workers were unorganized and underpaid. Here, said Reeves, was " a public opinion ready to accept . . . a strange and novel experiment . . . Humanity was the better for what had been done " ¹⁸. The Victorian example was followed in the other colonies. The reforming Reid Government in New South Wales (1894-1899) passed an important and comprehensive factory act in 1896 ; similar legislation was enacted in Queensland in 1896 and 1900, South Australia in 1894 and 1900, and Western Australia in 1897 ; early closing of shops was introduced in Western Australia in 1897, New South Wales in 1899, South Australia and Queensland in 1900, while the existing Victorian law was tightened up in 1896, and again in 1900. Even more unprecedented and far-reaching was the establishment of industrial tribunals for the fixing of wages and the conciliation and arbitration of industrial disputes. These quasi-legislative bodies, which have in time introduced a tremendous range of social and industrial reform were established first in South Australia in 1895, Victoria in 1896, and Western Australia in 1900, to be followed in New South Wales in 1901, Queensland in 1907, and Tasmania in 1910.

With the exception of land legislation all this was new. To quote Reeves again, writing in 1902,

" Much of the constructive work to which the colonial experimentalists have set their hands during the last 12 years . . . has required little in the way of historical preface . . . It began so abruptly that its connection with the past . . . may be sketched in a few paragraphs ".

¹⁷ Quoted, W. P. Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, 1902, pp. 72-73.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Most of this was the reaction to the exposure of the hardships and poverty created by the depression, which forced thoughtful men to consider more carefully the assumptions of the society in which they were living. The need for social reform was apparent ; the radical parties, wooing the labour vote and supported by labour's political representatives, were ready and able to provide it. No ready-made utopia was produced ; but many improvements were carried out, more effectively perhaps than would have been possible by the revolutionary idealists of the 1880s.

To this picture one important addition must be made. For it seems probable that the crisis of 1890-1894, economic, financial and industrial, played an important part in the final achievement of the federation of Australia in 1900. " Federation is no panacea ", said the *Pastoralist's Review* in 1893, " but it would be of considerable assistance in our present difficulties ". Industrial and financial problems alike emphasized the unity of Australia and the need for some form of central control as the banking crisis followed the great strikes ; and these immediate needs, when added to long standing arguments about defence, foreign policy, intercolonial customs and interstate communications strengthened the hands of the Federationists. At all events it was in the nineties that the final and successful federation campaign was launched, and prospered, to proceed to a successful conclusion for the opening of the twentieth century.

With the new century, therefore, there is some case for speaking of a " brave new world " in Australia. Not, it is true, the Utopia of starry-eyed visionaries, but a society cleansed of many evils (though with many still remaining) by the vigorous reform of radicals and progressives, whose activities were helped by the popular reaction to the calamities of the years 1890 to 1894. The result was at least a reformed and better Australian society, and if one may judge from the experience of utopians, it was perhaps an Australia with better prospects for the future well-being of her citizens than the society of which the visionaries had dreamed only a decade before.