

Slicing Australian History

REFLECTIONS ON THE BICENTENNIAL HISTORY PROJECT*

ANYONE who reviews the contemporary state of historical studies is likely to be struck by a remarkable paradox. Never before, perhaps, has the study of history in all its forms, popular as well as professional, been in so flourishing a condition. In my own country the number of full-time university historians has grown since 1960 from fewer than 100 to nearly 400 and the number of local historical societies—if that may be taken as an index of amateur or popular historical activity—has more than doubled, in my own state, from 74 to 150. This pattern of sustained growth, I have no doubt, is paralleled in New Zealand, as in most developed countries. (An armchair sociologist might even venture the proposition that the thirst for historical knowledge increases directly with the speed of social change). Side by side, however, with the growth in popular regard for history as a field of study we may observe a declining sense of confidence among professional historians in their intellectual and social worth. In a recent survey of *Historical Disciplines and Culture in Australasia*, which may be symptomatic of the current mood of self-absorption, several senior historians confessed to a sense of 'intellectual ennui' and alienation. They would like to believe that they perform some valuable social function but they found it difficult, as one of them admitted, to 'spell it out'.¹ These, I should emphasize, were not the misgivings of scholars in exotic or esoteric subjects; they were expressed most strongly by those who study the recent history of their own country.

To speak of a 'crisis in Australian historiography' may be as yet unwarranted. After all, historians, whose business is to study change and crisis, may be unduly prone to detect it within their own discipline. Nevertheless over the last twenty years or so historical study *has* undergone a significant change of direction which is rooted, I believe, in the

* This paper was first delivered at the meeting of the New Zealand Historical Association on 30 August 1981 in Wellington. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of other editors or writers involved in the Bicentennial Project.

¹ W.J. Hudson, 'The Historian's Social Function', in John Moses, ed., *Historical Disciplines and Culture in Australasia*, St. Lucia, 1979, p.6. Also see contributions by Moses, Munz and Gammage.

changed social role of the historian. A generation or so ago those who studied Australian or New Zealand history were concerned fundamentally with the problem of national identity. Historians were the tribunes of nationhood, the makers of national tradition. Their role in the process of nation-building was unspoken but secure. Over the past fifty years, and particularly over the past twenty years, this nexus between national purpose and historical enquiry has become attenuated to the point almost of dissolving. In my own country the progress—or some would say, the decline—from the liberal nationalism of Ernest Scott and W.K. Hancock, through the attempt to define a national 'ethos' by Russel Ward, Robin Gollan and Geoffrey Serle to the current professional orthodoxy of 'social history' reflects a steady weakening of the link between national consciousness and historical enquiry. Historians, with one or two illustrious exceptions, no longer see themselves as the interpreters of national character or purpose. If they champion a cause it is more likely to be that of a class, a party, an ethnic or racial group, a locality or a gender than that of the nation as a whole.

One may speculate on the causes of this transformation. In an interesting essay on historical traditions in Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea, Bill Gammage relates the parlous conditions of Australian historiography to the uncertainty of national purpose among a people without deeply rooted national traditions who have been bitterly divided by the constitutional crisis of 1975. 'Historians', he writes, 'do not know where their community, and therefore their craft, is or should be heading'.² Yet, by current world standards, ours are relatively old-established and socially homogeneous countries. If recent social divisions, such as the 1975 crisis or the Vietnam War (or perhaps you will say, in a few years, the Springbok Tour) have blunted our sense of national unity, we might ask why the far more profound divisions of 1891, 1916, and 1932 did not also divert historians from their nationalistic purpose. The truth, of course, is that the forces which have dissolved the link between nationalism and the writing of Australian history are more widespread than Australia itself and more deep-seated than the vicissitudes of its national politics. They derive, in part, from the internationalization, specialization and—one must now admit—ossification of academic history. In 1960 most of the members of history departments in Australian universities were themselves Australians and more than half were actually graduates of the universities in which they taught. By 1980 the proportion of 'local products'—academics who had taken their first degree in the city in which they taught—had shrunk to barely 25 per cent and the proportion of non-Australians had grown spectacularly.³ This was bound to break down the insularity and nation-

2 Bill Gammage, 'Truth and Tradition in Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea', *ibid.*, p.41.

3 From Calendars of metropolitan universities. No count was taken of non-metropolitan universities or Colleges of Advanced Education.

alistic bias of Australian historical writing. As we are now discovering, the rapid growth of the universities through the 1960s and 1970s also bequeathed to the 1980s an increasingly middle-aged historical profession. A cynic might even suggest that the alleged symptoms of 'intellectual ennui' are nothing more than a collective attack of menopausal anxiety. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, something more momentous than the simple process of ageing had overtaken this generation of scholars. In contrast to their elders, who had usually been reared on common-sense British empiricism, they became converted to the idea that the main objective of the human sciences, including history, was to expose the underlying structures, the unseen workings of society. If our eighteenth-century forebears had looked to God as the unseen First Cause in human history, and our nineteenth-century predecessors to the 'spirit of the nation', recent historians have sought their explanations in that mysterious force, 'the social'. To account for this conversion would doubtless exhaust all those sophisticated sociologies of knowledge to which the era gave birth. What is important for our purposes is that it occurred, and that instead of being the custodian of a tradition the historian was transformed into a critic of society.

Some people may argue that this was a transitory phenomenon, a momentary reaction to the revolutionary *journées* of 1968. Now, as the political pendulum swings once more, they will note signs that some old historical fashions—the hero-worshipping biography, the history of the upper classes, the study of high politics—may be making a come-back. But if such a new conservatism should appear, it will have to overthrow the intellectual dominance which social history has now won within a relatively unchanging academy.

Altogether it is ironic that, at a time when national historiography is in such an unsettled condition and when the sense of national purpose is apparently so enfeebled, Australians should be about to enjoy a round of national birthday celebrations. The first of these got under way in 1979 when the Western Australians, then flush with imported mining capital, celebrated their sesquicentenary by publishing no fewer than fourteen volumes of local history and literature.⁴ In a couple of years the South Australians and Victorians will follow suit with their own series of 150th birthday histories. The climax will come in 1988 when we commemorate 200 years of British settlement in Australia. The precise event to be commemorated, of course, is the founding of the 'mother colony' of New South Wales at Sydney Cove in 1788. The birthday is therefore also that of New South Wales and we may expect some diverting moments as its

⁴ For details see Geoffrey Blainey, 'Western Australia in fourteen volumes', *Historical Studies*, XIX, 77 (October 1981), 592-601. To the volumes reviewed by Blainey should be added C.T. Stannage, ed., *A New History of Western Australia*, Perth, 1981, and idem, *The People of Perth*, Perth, 1979.

politicians attempt to assert the preeminence of that state in the larger national jamboree.

How academic historians should respond to this round of national anniversaries is, or certainly should be, a challenging subject of debate within the profession. Nearly one hundred years ago, when the small band of amateur historians and journalists were asked to contribute to Australia's centenary, they knew precisely what was expected of them. Each of the heavy coffee table histories which local publishers put out to commemorate the occasion followed a well-tryed colonial recipe. Beginning with the journeys of the early explorers, they skimmed lightly over the sordid circumstances of the colonies' foundations (the convicts were usually referred to obliquely as 'exiles') and concentrated instead upon the sterling qualities of the early governors. The subsequent narratives followed two leading themes: the taming of the wilderness by the pioneering valour of the British race and the steady march of the separate colonies towards national unity under the British Crown. In aim, method and tone these celebrative histories stand in marked contrast to the present styles of Australian historical writing. They were heroic, progressive and nationalistic. We, on the other hand, exalt, not the heroic explorer or pioneer, but the 'ordinary man'. We are more sceptical than our forefathers of the idea of national progress. And we use, as our main synthesizing device, not the evolution of the nation but the structure of society. In 1988, as in 1888, politicians and public men will look to the historians for lives of national heroes, chronicles of national progress (or 'development' as it is now called) and historical emblems of national unity. And the professional historians will respond, if the Western Australian volumes are any guide, with collections of technically sophisticated but disconnected studies of ethnic groups, family structure, environmental problems and so on. Or so they may, unless new answers are quickly found to two old, but fundamental questions. The first is the question of the historian's moral responsibility as a citizen and concerns the public purposes of historical knowledge. The second, and closely-related, question is that of the historian's credentials as an interpreter of his society and concerns the principles of historical synthesis.

In 1977 Professor Ken Inglis, as the spokesman for a group of senior Australian historians, put forward a proposal for a series of bicentennial historical volumes which would be organized along radically different lines. The Australian Bicentennial History Project, as it has become known, consists of two main sections. The first and more conventional—but some would argue more valuable—section consists of a series of reference volumes: an historical atlas of Australia, a bibliographical and archival guide to the sources of Australian history, a book of historical statistics and a layman's handbook to Australian history. These volumes, which were warmly welcomed by the profession, are being prepared under the editorship of Professor Frank Crowley at the

University of New South Wales.⁵ The other, more controversial part of the project was for a series of what are now generally known as 'slice' volumes. In his 1977 proposal Inglis explained that he and his fellow historians had considered and rejected a number of more traditional models for a national history.

We decided [he reported] not to propose another Greenwood or Crowley volume, or an antipodean *Oxford History of England* or a one-nation *Cambridge History of the British Empire* or any other sort of general narrative history by many hands. It seemed to us that to follow any of those models would be merely to elaborate our present understandings of the past. . . . Instead of inviting a team of writers to divide up history into chronological sectors and have each fill in a stage of it in his or her own way, we thought of having a series of groups each working together at a very short period; instead of the traditional relay-race along well worn tracks, a series of survey camps; instead of a continuous thread of narrative, we imagined drilling a number of bores or (to avoid the painful senses of that word) cutting a number of slices.⁶

The team of historians should be encouraged to work collaboratively and to engage the skills of specialists in economic, demographic, geographical and cultural history. The 'slices', or short periods to be studied, would be selected not so as to coincide with the acknowledged high points in Australian history—years such as 1851 (the discovery of gold), 1901 (Federation) or 1914—but, in a sense, arbitrarily. In this way, he argued, 'we could find ourselves moving away from well-worn themes, exploring others less familiar to the profession, and discovering things not yet in our books about what life was like for earlier generations of Australians'. The four selected years—1788, 1838, 1888 and 1938—had the advantages of being nearly one person's lifetime apart, of producing a reasonable number of volumes, and of giving years in which people noted the span of time since 1788, celebrated and took stock. In summary, then, the 'slice' volumes would depart from the conventions of national historiography in three main respects: they would be written collaboratively rather than by individual volume or chapter writers; they would be critical rather than celebrative in approach; and they would be constructed, not as narratives of national development, but as social portraits of Australia at arbitrarily chosen moments in the past.

Australian historians are a robustly independent lot and it was not to be expected that the slice idea would command universal support. But after some animated debate—to which I will refer again in a moment—convenors were appointed to begin work on the four main slice volumes and discussions were begun on the shape of a fifth volume to cover the

5 See the bulletins *Australian Historical Statistics*, *Australian Historical Bibliography* and *Australian Historical Geography* issued by Australia 1788-1988, Reference Section, School of History, University of New South Wales.

6 Ken Inglis, 'Australia 1788-1988: A Note on Proposed Approaches', *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 1 (May 1977), 8-11; republished in *The Push from the Bush*, 1 (May 1978), 4-9.

period between the 1938 slice and the bicentennial itself in 1988. At about the same time the first approaches were made to the Commonwealth government's Bicentennial Authority for financial support. In the three years since the project got under way each of the working groups has maintained a vigorous programme of discussion through bulletins and conferences. Many people have expressed the view that the bulletins themselves, which contain full-length articles, short speculative notes, research reports and views of the project, would alone justify the effort put into the project. As an example, the 1888 section of the project has now published nine issues of its bulletin *Australia 1888*, several of them special thematic issues devoted to such topics as social and geographical mobility, regional history, family history, Manning Clark and Australian historiography, cultural aspects of 1888 and so on. Gradually each of the 'slice' groups has developed a style and an *esprit de corps* of its own. The 1788ers, under John Mulvaney and J. Peter White, plan to give at least four-fifths of their volume to a portrait of Aboriginal society at the moment of European entry and have attracted a strong team of archaeologists and pre-historians. The 1838ers under Marion Aveling and Alan Atkinson have shown a strong interest in what may loosely be described as 'ethnographic' history—the study of social structure as it is revealed in such small-scale dramas of everyday life as weddings, funerals, trials and church services and in the private lives of 'ordinary people'. The 1888 volume, of which John McCarty and I are editors, has been strongly influenced by the approach of the *Annales* school and insofar as we have a specific model it is perhaps the kind of fully-textured detailed portrait of environment, economy, society and politics that one finds in Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. We aim to portray, more fully than hitherto, the regional and social diversity of Australia in 1888 and the ways in which different environments and regional economies were mediated in family structures and class relations. Alone among the 'slice' years, 1938 is within the range of living memory and the editors of that volume, Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt, have slanted their approach heavily towards the collection and interpretation of interviews with a sample of people who were growing up in the late 1930s.⁷

From its very inception the proposal for a series of slice volumes has attracted its critics. Some senior members of the profession, it was said, had conspired to obtain a large amount of government money (one million dollars was the sum spoken of) for a 'monopolistic' and 'idiosyncratic' project which would stifle innovation and independent historical

7 Bulletin issued by the various sub-sections of the project are: *The Push from the Bush* [1838]; *Australia 1888*; *Australia 1938* and *Australia 1939-88*. Copies may be obtained through the Assistant General Editors (Section A), *Australia 1788-1988: A Bicentennial History*, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, P.O. Box 4, Canberra A.C.T. 2001.

enquiry for the next ten years.⁸ Most of these suspicions, I believe, have turned out to be groundless. The hoped-for one million dollars of government money has not been forthcoming and participants in the project have been required to go to their own universities and to the Australian Research Grants Committee and compete with others' projects for research funds. This, I think, has been a generally healthy outcome: it has been good for us to have to justify our progress stage by stage and, although we could certainly have used more funds if they had been available (especially for the reference volumes, which are a rather expensive venture) the amounts forthcoming have been quite sufficient to get the project launched. Moreover, it has dissipated any lingering fears that the volumes themselves would be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by a desire to please the government of the day. The idea that the project would be monopolistic—'the sole scholarly focus', as one critic claimed, 'of enormous investment, both of professional energy and government money'—has also been falsified by events. Several other historical projects are under way for the bicentenary—some vigorous critics of the Bicentennial Project are now writing volumes in a forthcoming *Oxford History of Australia*, written along more conventional narrative lines; the Australian War Memorial envisages a series of books on the history of Australians at war; the Academies of Science and the Humanities will sponsor volumes on the history of science and the arts; a group of architectural historians are at work on a bicentennial architectural history. If there is any danger then, it seems to be a superabundance of commemorative history rather than a monopoly by the Bicentennial History Project.

But if many of the early criticisms of the project have turned out to be groundless, other more fundamental ones have continued to be voiced. The most persistent, I suppose, concern the political implications, and interpretative possibilities of the slice method. In the rest of this paper I would like to offer a personal defence of 'slice' history and to suggest some ways in which I think it may help us to face up to the larger issues of national historiography.

'There are no slices in Clio's temple', a well-known Australian historian recently warned me. Had he expressed his views more discursively and positively he would have asserted, no doubt, that the past is a 'seamless web' or a continuum that cannot be so arbitrarily broken. The historian's essential task is to trace the unfolding of events through time. We may liken his view of history to E.M. Forster's famous definition of the novel. 'What is a novel?' the great novelist asked. 'A novel', he replied with deceptive simplicity, 'tells a story'. History, too, it may be argued, tells a story and is therefore committed to a linear time perspective and a narrative method. The historian must explain how things are

⁸ See especially contributions by Beverley Kingston and Patrick O'Farrell in *Australian Historical Association Bulletin*, 1 (May 1977), 11-14.

by how they came to be. This, of course, is an old and honourable view that I hardly need develop—especially here in Wellington where it has been defended with such verve and learning by Peter Munz.

Old and honourable though that view may be, few of its advocates would deny that theirs is now a theoretical, rather than a practical definition of history. The general abandonment of narrative lies, in fact, at the root of Peter Munz's unshakeable pessimism about the future of the discipline. Those scholars, like the famous *Annales* school, who have given up writing narratives to study 'segments of time' are said to have deserted history and to have become social scientists of the past. So Munz cheerfully relegates much of modern historical scholarship—including Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Lewis Namier and the whole rowdy caravanserai of social historians—to the category of 'social science'.⁹ The Australian Bicentennial History Project, if we followed his reasoning, should presumably be renamed The Australian Bicentennial Historical Sociology Project and, as such, it might eventually produce some useful laws about nineteenth- and twentieth-century society which real historians could use in their narratives.

Implicit in Munz's view is the idea that historians and social scientists differ more fundamentally in how they explain things than in what they study. The fact that historians mainly study past societies and social scientists present-day ones is less significant than that the concern of the first is with causal links through time while the business of the second is to discover the 'social laws' prevailing within a particular society or epoch. This is an admirably clear-cut definition of disciplinary territory and it is supported by a long and distinguished intellectual pedigree from Auguste Comte to Karl Popper. But as an account of what either sociologists or historians now do it is, of course, hopelessly outmoded. Few of the currently dominant schools of sociology—Weberian, Marxist, symbolic interactionist—would subscribe to Popper's epistemology of social science or conceive themselves to be formulating social laws in Popper's positivistic sense. Many of them, however, are deeply concerned with those questions of time and change which Munz sees as the special province of the historian. So, for example, in a recent essay one of the most talented younger social theorists, Anthony Giddens, emphasizes the irreducibly temporal quality of all social relationships and actually concludes that 'there are simply no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history—appropriately conceived'.¹⁰ The ways in which our experience of time is shaped is now studied, in a range of non-narrative modes, by sociologists and geographers as well as social historians. (In a recent issue of our bulletin I have touched on the nature of the relationship between the linear conceptions of time exhibited in the official histories of Australia published in

9 'Cast a Cold Eye', Moses, pp.11-16.

10 *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Berkeley, 1979, p.230.

1888 and the experiences of everyday time shared by different groups in that society.)¹¹ Most of the conventional ways of distinguishing between the social sciences and history—one as a generalizing, the other as a particularizing; one as a synchronic, the other as a diachronic study—no longer reflect what historians actually do. We may regret that it is so and we may even imagine that we can undo the damage by legislating retrospectively for the use of the words ‘history’ and ‘social science’. But I think we may be better occupied in trying to understand why the disciplinary barriers have come down than in vainly trying to raise them again.

Recently, it is true, there has been discussion in international journals about an alleged ‘revival of narrative’. According to Lawrence Stone, who coined the phrase, there are signs in the work of recent French and British historians, especially those strongly influenced by the *Annales* school, of a swing away from structuralist theories of human behaviour towards more loosely-patterned humanistic ones; from a focus on large collectivities to an interest in the *mentalité* of individuals, and from static analysis to narrative.¹² The forces which Stone detects behind this change in historical fashion—a renewed interest in questions of power, the desire for a closer relationship between the professional historian and his lay public—are similar to those which move traditional defenders of narrative, such as Munz. But there, I think, the correspondence ends for it is clear that the works which Stone cites as examples of the revival—Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* and Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*—apply narrative essentially as a device for illustrating on-going characteristics of society rather than as a general explanatory principle. When those writers tell us the story of an obscure shepherd or necromancer, or when they describe the course of a trial or some other dramatic episode, they do so—as Stone emphasizes—not in order to explain how a particular set of customs or beliefs came into being, but ‘in order to throw light upon the internal workings of a past culture and society’.¹³ The explanations they offer owe more to the anthropology of Evans-Pritchard or Clifford Geertz than to the methods of traditional narrative history. Such a use of narrative, as a method of exposition, rather than an explanatory principle, is of course perfectly consistent with the ‘slice’ or cross-sectional approach—the story of a swagman is told in order to illustrate the pattern of rural itinerancy; the progress of a trial is related in order to show how the system of criminal justice works.

For Munz, the decline of narrative history bespeaks the historians’

11 ‘Historic Time and Everyday Time’, *Australia 1888*, 7, pp.5-10.

12 ‘The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History’, *Past and Present*, LXXXIV (August 1979), 1-24. Also see E.J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments’, *ibid.*, LXXXVI (February 1980), 1-8, and Phillip Abrams, ‘History, Sociology, Historical Sociology’, *ibid.*, LXXXVII (May 1980), 1-16.

13 Stone, p.19.

woeful lack of confidence in their proper vocation. If history as a discipline is under threat, it is not because modern society has decreed 'the death of the past', but because historians have abdicated the role which society assigned to them—explaining the course of change. There is, however, another possibility, which Munz does not concede—that historians have abandoned the narrative method precisely because it failed to provide an adequate explanation of social change. To show that one set of circumstances followed upon another is not necessarily to provide a satisfying explanation of it. The 'slice' or cross-sectional method challenges three main features of the narrative approach: its linear conception of time, its inbuilt teleological bias and its typically narrow selection of causal factors.

When we use the term 'slice' history we obviously speak figuratively, since we know that time is not something that can be divided, like Norman Lindsay's famous 'magic pudding', into slices. It is equally true, of course—though long familiarity may have made it less obvious—that time is not actually a 'stream' or a 'seamless web' and that the idea of continuous or linear time, which underlies the narrative method, is equally metaphorical. Each metaphor—time as a 'stream' or as a 'slice'—has its social purpose. The most primitive form of narrative history is genealogy, and the narrative method, as Peter Munz acknowledges, reached its fullest development in tracing the descent, and thus establishing the legitimacy, of the nation state. 'It is the historian's function in nation-making to create the illusion that the nation is a group of people held together not by kinship [as with a tribe or clan], but by pseudo-kinship; that is, by a common destiny expressed in shared language, a common purpose or a common aspiration. . . . The historian's work shows that the past is a function of national consciousness and purpose, and of the desire to form a society. Without this work societies could not be organized as nations.'¹⁴ Narrative is the device by which historians create the illusion of a common purpose or destiny and, according to Munz, this is their essential educative function. (In a secular detribalized world national myths, he implies, are one of the few remaining sources of social solidarity.) Other collectivities—parties, professions, classes—create their own legitimating narratives which select events according to a known outcome—'the development of the labour movement', 'the creation of modern medicine', 'the crisis of capitalist society'. In constructing his narrative the historian has the immense advantage of hindsight: he selects those facts or events which appear to favour that known outcome and he ignores those which are irrelevant to it, whether or not they seemed important to contemporaries. By focusing upon an arbitrarily chosen moment of time the slice approach acts as a corrective to the inbuilt teleological bias of narrative history. It implies that we temporarily abstain from the search for 'the most significant

¹⁴ Peter Munz, 'Gesta Dei Per Australianos', *Australia 1888*, 3 (December 1979), p.6.

years, or the busiest or the epochal' and concentrate instead upon the routine, the ordinary and the mundane. Instead of assigning significance to events in terms of a known outcome or *telos* it gently subverts the 'received notions of the rhythms or contours of Australian history'.¹⁵ Instead of exalting the established heroes of Australian history, it aims to rescue the struggling selector, the suburban housewife, even perhaps the landboomer's clerk, from the 'appalling condescension of posterity'.

By limiting the time frame of historical analysis, slice history aims to widen the range of potentially interesting causal factors and to promote the use of concepts which link the conventionally discrete topics of economic, demographic, political and religious history. I can perhaps best illustrate this point with an example. One of the most notable features of Australia in the 1880s is the rapid introduction of new forms of power and technology. In Australia and New Zealand, as throughout most of the industrializing world, the 1880s saw a sharp increase in the use of energy for light, heat and motive power and a decisive shift away from traditional forms of man, animal, wind, steam and water power and towards the use of coal, oil and electricity. If an ordinary Australian in 1888 had been asked to give his views on 'the energy crisis' it is unlikely that he would have known what was meant. Yet several interesting events of that year—ranging from the Newcastle coalminers' strike to the controversy about the destruction of Australia's forests, and from the introduction of the shearing machine to the new applications of hydraulic power—turned around the obsolescence of old energy technologies or the advance of new ones. When historians write about technological change they usually think in terms of a linear progression from simple to complex, and from 'primitive' to 'advanced'. New inventions are inevitably accorded more importance than old contraptions; and their novelty or importance is measured by how far they approximate to our own standard of modernity. By contrast, a slice historian would seek to understand the importance of technology, new and old, in relation to the on-going needs of the society. He would attempt to reconstruct the complementary and competing uses of different forms of energy and their human implications. By considering different kinds of power in relation to each other, rather than within 'tunnel histories' of labour relations, the coal industry or the railways, he would seek to understand the relationship of technology to society as a systemic whole.

A slice view of the Australian energy system in 1888 would highlight a rather different set of factors to the narrative history. It would demonstrate, first of all, the continuing dominance of old forms of energy such as manpower and horsepower. For example in 1888 I estimate that Australia's 1.3 million horses supplied more motive power than all other sources of power—man, wind, water and steam—combined. Despite the rapid expansion of coal-powered locomotives and

15 Inglis, p.9.

the opening up of new coal fields in New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania, firewood remained far and away the country's main boiler fuel. Secondly, the slice approach highlights the fact that technological change is not a simple linear process: old and accepted ways of doing things do not uniformly or unresistingly give way to new ones. The rate of technical innovation may vary markedly between industries, firms and regions: a slice approach helps to pinpoint the factors that influenced it. Sometimes, as new technologies were introduced in one sector or region, older technologies expanded elsewhere to meet the increased capacity of the system as a whole. As Raphael Samuel has recently demonstrated for 'The Workshop of the World', industrial Britain, mechanization of one phase of production often produced an intensification of drudgery in others.¹⁶ In Australia, too, the introduction of labour-saving machinery such as shearing machines, reapers and binders and hydraulic cranes had the effect of eliminating one kind of heavy work but of concentrating the remaining labour force upon even harder tasks. Finally, whereas the conventional narrative focuses attention upon spectacular technical advances, the slice approach—by considering technical change from the vantage point of its social ramifications—is more sensitive to the large effects of relatively small and simple devices. In 1888, for example, the little-discussed and gradual introduction of double-furrowed wrought iron ploughs was probably doing more to transform agricultural labour than the more sophisticated and publicized reaper and binder. On this, as on many other topics, the slice approach emphasizes the small-scale, uneven and reflexive character of social change. By examining the 'diagram of forces' within society at a given moment of time, we come to recognize the points of tension and opposition from which change emerges. Few aspects of Australian society in 1888 were more volatile than the technology of energy-use; yet I would argue that it is precisely by reconstructing the energy system, locating the points of friction as well as the patterns of interdependence, that we will develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of change.¹⁷ The same arguments might also be advanced for the study of high or popular culture and class relations.

I have been concerned so far to try and establish the credentials of the slice approach as a way of understanding and explaining the past and, in particular, to suggest some of the ways in which it may actually help the historian in his characteristic concern with problems of time and change. There remains, however, the important question of the political and social purpose of such an account of the past. Narrative, we know, is the characteristic mode of national history: it tells us about progress towards

16 'The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop*, III (Spring 1977), 6-73.

17 I have developed the points in the preceding paragraphs at greater length in 'The Australian Energy System in 1888', *Australia 1888*, 10 (forthcoming).

a valued goal. But what is the public or political purpose of slice history?

One clue to the likely appeal of slice history is found in Ken Inglis's 1977 proposal. 'A book about Australia in a particular year', he wrote, 'would have qualities in common with such enterprises as Old Sydney Town or Sovereign Hill, built to show what our society was like at a particular moment in its past.'¹⁸ This is an interesting thought and it prompts one to ask: what are the roots of popular historical consciousness? Why do people flock in such numbers to folk museums and reconstructed villages? Why are films about Australia's past so much more popular than contemporary ones? One commonly given answer is that we are suffering 'future shock'. Dismayed by the world in which we live and apprehensive about the one that is rapidly coming into being, we unconsciously retreat into a simpler, more harmonious dream world of the past. If this is so, then the more folksy, the more bland, the more innocently bucolic our view of Australia in 1888 the better box-office it will be. It might even be argued that the slice method naturally lends itself to such a cosy view of Australia's past. 'The new social history', writes Drew Cottle, in reference to the project, 'has a fascination with the minutiae of "social life". Its themes are compliance, passivity, unity, Lucky Country.'¹⁹ The implication is plain—'slice history' is the expression of a conservative ideology and those who use it, whatever their political inclinations, will fall prey to a blandly functionalist view of Australian society.

One of the most interesting aspects of the debate about the slice approach is that its opponents have been ranged on both the political right and left. Conservatives, I suspect, oppose slicing because they believe that it severs the organic link with the past; Marxists because it undermines the teleology which draws them towards a revolutionary future. In my view, the slice method is a politically neutral, but methodologically radical, device. While it is true, as its Marxist critics claim, that it encourages us to examine functional relationships within a society, it does not—as I have tried to show—preclude a recognition of conflict or change. (When one of our critics reproaches us for not attacking the problem 'of how [the] social order is maintained or whose interests it serves' he is asking—whether he recognizes it or not—for a kind of functional analysis.)²⁰ Nor, I believe, is slice history necessarily the expression of a rosily nostalgic view of the past. On the contrary, it provides the basis for a profoundly unsettling view of both past and present.

Slice history, of course, is not a new invention and the great historians who pioneered the method—Macaulay in the famous third chapter of his *History of England*, Halévy in his *History of the English People in 1815*,

18 Inglis, p.8.

19 'Moving About with House and Garden', *Bowyang*, V (April/May 1981), 4.

20 *ibid.*, p.5.

Marc Bloch in his *Feudal Society*—used it to answer urgent political questions about their own society and where it was heading. But the questions they asked, and the values which underlay them, differed in each instance. Macaulay drew his portrait of England at the accession of James II as a backdrop to the narrative of material progress and widening liberty which would unfold in the rest of his volume. Halévy, a Frenchman disturbed by his own country's feverish cycles of revolution and reaction, dissected English society to discover the causes of its comparative stability. Bloch, writing in the shadow of Hitler's invasion, probed the material and moral basis of an earlier regime soon to be engulfed by a barbarian onslaught. If our slices of Australia in 1788, 1838, 1888 and 1938 are not to become just clever pieces of historical reconstruction—'crinolines and corsets stuff', to use the dismissive phrase of one critic²¹—they too must be composed in accordance with some moral design. Critical history, as distinct from antiquarianism, involves a moral discourse between the historian and the remnants of the past. The historian appraises the questions which the people of past times asked of themselves in the light of the questions he asks of his own.

If we wish to know what questions Australians asked of themselves in 1888, the most convenient starting point is the rich deposit of speeches, commemorative histories, statues, epic poems and cantatas which they produced to mark the country's centenary. Here, often in grotesquely exaggerated form, are represented the officially sanctioned values of society. In his book *The Australian Colonists* and in his various writings on 'The Anzac Legend', Ken Inglis has shown us how much may be learned about national identity, and the forces which shaped it, by sensitively examining the behaviour of Australians on such high days and holidays.²² His method, which owes something to the techniques of the anthropologist and the literary critic, requires a sharp eye for the ways in which common values are made concrete in symbol and ritual and for the ambiguities and conflicts which such performances attempt to transcend.

One interesting way of approaching a 'slice' history of 1888 might be to take up the moral questions which lay behind the celebrations and ceremonies of that year and to examine the relationship between 'myth' and 'reality' in the larger society. By organizing the book around a series of fundamental moral or political questions, commonly shared by the Australians of 1888 and ourselves, we might help to promote that discourse among the contributors to the volume, between present and past, and between the historical profession and our lay public, which is the proper object of historical enquiry. If narrative is the historical mode appropriate to the stage of nation-building—of a nation in the making

21 Terry Irving and Bob Connell, 'Class in 1888: Theme or Theory?', *Australia 1888*, 6 (November 1980), p.74.

22 *The Australian Colonists*, Melbourne 1974, esp. chs.5-9; 'Australia Day', *Historical Studies*, XIII, 49 (October 1967), 20-41; 'Monuments and Ceremonies as Evidence for Historians' (unpublished 1977 ANZAAS paper).

but not yet made—then perhaps slice history is a mode more appropriate to a mature nation—one sufficiently confident of its integrity to be able to acknowledge its social and geographical diversity and to scrutinize its common values. In the final section of this paper I would like to sketch the way in which I think a volume on 1888 might be so approached.

The public ceremonies of 26 January 1888—‘Anniversary Day’ as it was known in most of the colonies—asserted the primacy of certain shared values and ideals—order, unity, progress and so on. These are portrayed as the common thread of colonial history and the leading features of contemporary colonial society. But the purpose of ritual, of course, is not only to *represent* the values admired within a society but to play out, and sometimes to mediate, *contradictions* between officially sanctioned values and the ways in which society actually conducts itself. Indeed, the more emphatically some ideals are asserted, the more evident it becomes that they are under attack. So if, for example, the public actors of 1888 emphasize values of social order and colonial unity, it may be because that order is contested and that unity is jeopardized.

‘We are showing our veneration for order’, Lord Carrington, the Governor of New South Wales, proclaimed as he unveiled the Queen’s Statue in the Domain on 24 January 1888.²³ During the banquets and receptions of the following week, guests were seated according to precedence; in ceremonial processions, the various contingents were duly listed in the public press. There were salutations, speeches of loyalty, presentations of gifts—the full panoply of rituals by which the social order was represented and confirmed. Yet in society generally there were growing manifestations of discontent with the existing order of things. 1888, according to Bob Connell and Terry Irving, was ‘a year of transition in the formation of classes. The political and cultural dominance of an urban mercantile ruling class was beginning to be challenged from below.’²⁴ The royalist effusions from the official platforms were answered by republican outbursts from Sydney bohemia. Similarly, while the centenary was officially hailed as the foretaste of a greater Australian, or Australasian federation, behind the scenes the various colonial premiers jockeyed for advantage. In his ode ‘To Australia’, J.F. Daniel, a Melbourne grocer and hack poet, asked:

Will a great and free nation, cemented by love
 And earth’s dearest ties, fuse thy states into one?
 Will the Cross, our brightest emblem, gaze down from above
 On the noblest Dominion that lies ‘neath the sun?²⁵

Yet despite the federal ambitions of Sir Henry Parkes, and the rhetoric

23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 1888.

24 ‘Class in 1888’, p.75; and see their *Class Structure in Australian History*, Melbourne, 1980, ch.4.

25 ‘To Australia’ printed as epigraph to Andrew Garran, ed., *The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, Sydney, 1886-8, I.

of Anniversary Day, the celebrations of 1888 revealed a people still more divided than united, more intent upon asserting their individual colonial interests than promoting the interests of Australia as a whole.

A second major theme in the centennial celebrations is the ideal of material and moral progress. Modern technology and British pioneering valour had together speedily created a new civilization from an untamed wilderness. 'There is nothing like this growth in all the world's history', proclaimed Andrew Garran.

It has been magical in its celerity. The American colonies crawled into existence as compared with the uprising of these new states. We have fringed our coasts with prosperous settlements and penetrated far into the interior parts of our great possessions. We speak with America and Europe daily, and our railway mileage rivals some, and compares favourably with many, of the older communities. This prodigiously rapid development is of course due, to a large extent, to the vast appliances placed at our disposal by the devices of modern civilisation. We have the capital of England and the inventions of the world at our command. . . . Blessed with an intelligent and energetic population, we have seized on our rich possession and turned it to the best account.²⁶

The proofs of their progress were everywhere to be seen and nowhere, perhaps, as conspicuously as in the careers of the men who dominated the public platforms. Australia's centenary was a collective celebration of individual success. The commemorative volumes put out for the occasion contained the biographies of hundreds of successful pioneers. The formula was a familiar one: the hero was born, usually, in humble circumstances somewhere across the sea, migrated to Australia as a young man, steadily made his way up in business and by 1888 was the proud possessor of his own home, the father of a family, a small investor and a pillar of local society.²⁷

Yet by 1888 there were also signs of poverty as well as progress. The marvellous prosperity of Melbourne had to be set beside the evidence of deepening recession in South Australia (where the centennial celebrations were understandably more muted) and rising unemployment in Sydney itself. A feature of the centenary celebrations there was a distribution of food to the poor: while the visiting dignitaries dined on grouse, sole and salmon and quaffed magnums of Perrier Jouet champagne, the Sydney unemployed queued up for handouts of mutton, bread and pipe tobacco.²⁸ The claims of technology to civilize the new land were also offset by signs of nature's continuing will to resist: the centennial celebrations occurred in the midst of a widespread drought; much of eastern Australia was overrun by a plague of rabbits and scientists were apprehensive that the country's forest resources were rapidly being depleted.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.(ii).

²⁷ See, for example, Alexander Sutherland, ed., *Victoria and its Metropolis*, II, Melbourne 1888.

²⁸ Maya Tucker, 'Centennial Celebrations 1888', *Australia 1888*, 7 (April 1981), p.14.

The conquest of the land had also, of course, required the dispossession of its original black inhabitants. Few of the centennial historians and speechmakers chose to dwell on this theme, although a procession in Parramatta included, as its centre-piece, a series of *tableaux vivants*: one, representing Australia in 1788 showed a group of aborigines brandishing their spears at a supine white man; another, representing 1887, showed Australia seated on a bale of wool with an aboriginal kneeling before her.²⁹ Alexander Sutherland, in his centennial volume *Victoria and its Metropolis*, offered the most forthright justification for the subjugation of the aborigines. They were, he argued, a barbarous people with little respect for human life, property, chastity or any of the common tenets of morality. 'Such a race', he concluded, 'could never have been numerous and in spite of the kindly feeling to them for their good-humoured ways, we can scarcely regret that scenes of lust and bloodshed and cannibalism have come to an end and that where these hours of midnight diablerie once filled the air with lamentations, there is now the decent little church or the neat state school, with human beings that have some ideal to live for, and some justification to plead for their existence'.³⁰ But alongside these protestations of superior virtue there were muted expressions of regret and guilt. During a debate on arrangements for the centenary celebrations, the radical Thomas Walker asked if something would be done for the benefit of the aborigines. To which Parkes bluntly replied: 'And remind them that we have robbed them.'³¹

The strident assertions of the 1888 celebrations and the muffled cries of dissent together establish the terms of a moral debate which should inform our historical portrait of Australia in that year. The issues raised by the rhetoric of that occasion—the question of national unity, the idea of Australia as 'a land of opportunity', the claims of technology and capital to civilize the land, the relationship between the European conquerors and the original black inhabitants of the country—will remain fundamental questions for Australians in 1988. The emerging conflict between the populous manufacturing states and the resource-rich frontier states once again questions the basis of our national unity. The conflict between mineral companies, on the one hand, and aborigines and environmentalists, on the other, call into question our assumptions about the connection between material and moral progress. And the prospect of a nation increasingly polarized between the middle-aged, tax-avoiding rich and the young unemployed may cause us to question, as we have not for forty years, the myth of the 'Lucky Country'.

The 'new social history' provides us with the means to explore these questions in a number of illuminating ways. Some of us have begun to look more closely at the idea of Australia as a 'workingman's paradise'.

29 *ibid.*, p.17.

30 Sutherland, *Victoria and its Metropolis*, I, 28.

31 A.W. Martin, *Henry Parkes: A Biography*, Melbourne, 1980, p.269.

We have examined patterns of wealth holding, the formation of colonial elites, the access of colonial children to schooling and its effects upon their economic prospects, the social mobility or immobility exhibited in the occupations of fathers and sons, and so on. The object of such enquiries is not simply to debunk the myth of individual progress—although it certainly shows us more clearly than we have known before how strict were the limits upon success. It also helps us to understand why the myth was so widely believed and the mechanisms by which it was propagated and sustained.³² One can readily see how the same approach could be extended to look at technological progress, aborigine-white relations and so on.

In summarizing the aims of the Bicentennial slice volumes I said that they departed from orthodox narrative history in three ways: they would offer a slice or cross-sectional view of Australia at arbitrarily chosen moments in time; they would be written collaboratively rather than by single volume or chapter authors; and they would be written for a popular, rather than academic, readership. Throughout the early stages of the project the 'slice' idea has been the feature which caused most debate and raised the most interesting historiographical issues. Now, however, as we pass beyond preliminary discussion to the detailed research and writing of the volumes, the difficulties of collaborative authorship and writing for a popular readership may be of increasing concern. The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. In the end, the question of whether our magic pudding can be sliced may be less troubling than the question of whether—with so many academic cooks—it is produced on time and satisfies its eaters.

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32 See contributions to *Australia 1888*, 2 (August 1979).