

## Australia, Argentina and Atomization

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ATOMIZATION of colonial society used to be orthodoxy in Australia. Having played a part in its undoing, I approached Miles Fairburn's book warily. It is a more elaborate statement of the theme than was ever provided for Australia, but it has not led me to favour reinstating it for Australia — or to accept it for New Zealand. Nevertheless, I found *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* an abundant, stimulating book. Fairburn is open and honest with his evidence and his method; he is always willing to offer counter cases and alternative hypotheses. If the test of good historical scholarship is that it should carry the evidence for its own refutation, then this is an excellent book.

Atomization was introduced to Australian scholarship in 1930 by Sir Keith Hancock in his classic study *Australia*. It was invoked to explain the weakness of local government and the strength of central governments. Hancock wrote:

Consider the predicament of the pioneers: they are separated from each other by unheard-of distances, which, somehow or other, must be bridged; they are strangers to each other, and have broken every familiar association by their voyage across the sea; no one of them is sufficient to himself, yet each is so isolated from his fellows and so engrossed in his struggles that effective local co-operation is impossible; or, if co-operation is achieved in some favoured locality, there still remains the great gaps which separate this happy community from its neighbours.<sup>1</sup>

The argument was taken up and extended by the historians of education to explain in particular why central governments, rather than local bodies, had to control the schools.<sup>2</sup>

This argument was not developed from a close inspection of how rural people actually interacted, or failed to interact with each other. Distance and isolation seemingly carried the authority of objective data and they had the further appeal of being part of Australians' image of their country. We boast of cattle stations the size of counties or even countries. Hancock told his English audience that there was no doctor between Hawker in South Australia and Darwin on the north coast, a distance of 1300 miles.

There are many flaws in this argument. The first is the treatment of the whole country as a single entity. There was no doctor between Hawker and Darwin, but

1 W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, 1930, Brisbane, 1961, p.52.

2 G.V. Portus, *Free, Compulsory and Secular: A Critical Estimate of Australian Education*, Oxford, 1937, pp.6-17; A.G. Austin, *Australian Education 1788-1900: Church, State and Public Education in Colonial Australia*, Melbourne, 1961, pp.173-7.

there were virtually no people either. To prove that Australia's population is sparse and scattered by citing overall figures on population density is fallacious, since two thirds of the continent is desert. In the settled areas population was certainly more scattered than in Europe, but not very different from parts of the United States, Argentina and New Zealand.

The second flaw, which I take to be fatal, is that an inspection of rural life reveals that even in sparsely settled areas people maintained local institutions through their own efforts — notably churches and schools. Hundreds of them stood alone at cross roads in open countryside. The new central departments of education would not build schools where the number of children who could be gathered together was less than 20 or 25; they would provide a teacher only if the parents provided a building. In the most remote areas more was expected of parents than in the towns and closely settled districts — and yet historians claimed that central organization of education had to be developed because settlers in sparse areas could not help themselves! Parents built the schools; children could walk and ride each day to attend them; what was to stop the parents gathering once a month to conduct their affairs? Single teacher schools under local control were standard in large parts of the United States. The argument that the isolated and scattered nature of settlement required central control of education would work only if there were no schools and children were educated by correspondence or over the radio. There are such areas in Australia, but they are not typical of rural settlement generally.<sup>3</sup>

On the Argentine pampas there were very few schools or churches. Historians of that country attribute this to the 'dispersed and often temporary' nature of settlement (the Fairburn formulation). But the population density on the Argentine pampas was the same as in the Australian wheat and sheep belt, where there was a good network of churches and schools. If the Australians could manage to build these institutions why couldn't the Argentines? The answer is that the Australians had more resources, more experience in self-help, and simply a greater desire to have them.<sup>4</sup>

This discussion has, I hope, demonstrated the perils of geographical determinism to which Fairburn has hitched his waggon — settlers are isolated, the roads are appalling and hence there must be certain social consequences. But must there? Fairburn considers settlers led impoverished lives. To my mind Fairburn's conception of human capacity and resource and more generally of culture is impoverished. The assumption of his study is mechanistic — bonds between people lessen according to the distance between them. But it is a commonplace that distance is relative. Its effects will depend on what is to move and what resources and effort can be devoted to the journey. The effect of distance on social life will depend, in part, on how much the people concerned desire to overcome it.

In Australia those who want to stress the difficulties of distance point to the

3 J.B. Hirst, 'Centralization Reconsidered: the South Australian Education Act of 1875', *Historical Studies*, 13 (1967), pp.42-59.

4 J. Hirst, 'La sociedad rural y la política en Australia, 1850-1930', in J. Fogarty, E. Gallo, H. Dieguez, eds., *Argentina y Australia*, Buenos Aires, 1979.

six-month journeys of waggons which took wool to the port and brought stores to the interior. Yet at the same time squatters on horse-back were covering up to 70 or 80 miles in a day to seek each other's company or to visit the capital cities on business or pleasure. Their shepherds, by contrast, did live isolated lives. But with the replacement of shepherds by fences, and the rise in the standard of living, the ownership of horses or access to them became common amongst rural working men. The distances in the Australian bush were large, but the Australian stockman was much more mobile than the English agricultural labourer.<sup>5</sup>

In newly settled areas there was an evident determination to overcome the effects of isolation. The opening of new country continued in Western Australia into the twentieth century and for one district in the new wheat belt beyond the rabbit-proof fence we have a community study based in oral history. The author discovered that, from the beginning of settlement, farmers co-operated closely with each other in the work of establishing their farms, and anyone with a special skill gave advice and assistance to his neighbours. Visiting among neighbours quickly became a settled custom on Sundays and holidays, and on one or two occasions the residents from the whole district would gather for a picnic. Social contact at other times took place within a number of smaller localities. There was no township of any sort in the area until five or six years after its first settlement, when the railway arrived. Before then, farmers delivered their wheat and collected stores at stations outside the district. Significantly, the first meeting places in the district apart from the farmhouses themselves, had social purpose: residents built tennis courts at three central places and at one of them they laid an open-air dance floor and sheltered it with a rough roof. The next building to be erected in the district was a brush shelter for Presbyterian church services, which many attended who were not of that faith. In surveying this 'web of local interaction' the author concluded that a high value was placed on community-mindedness and the willingness to mix, and that the lack of status difference between the farmers facilitated this co-operation and mixing. People in this area knew what atomization was — they feared it and worked to overcome it. Neighbourliness, so deeply entrenched in the culture, acquired a new imperative.<sup>6</sup>

Fairburn records interaction of a similar sort in rural New Zealand in his period. To dismiss this as not constituting real bonds among people he has to perform some amazing contortions<sup>7</sup> — these associations had 'a purely social or diversionary objective' (not irrelevant, surely, for a social history); where they were more than this it was merely for emergencies (in these cases the people were doing the work which formal institutions elsewhere performed); the bonds should have included the lending of money (so antipathetic to the ethic of the independent proprietor — he might as well take wife-swapping as the test of genuine community bonds); there was help with harvesting (but only in wheat

5 J.B. Hirst, 'Distance in Australia — was it a tyrant?', *Historical Studies*, 16 (1975), pp.435-47.

6 W.E. Greble, *A Bold Yeomanry: social change in a wheatbelt district, Kulin, 1848-1970*, Perth, 1979.

7 See, in particular, Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies*, Auckland, 1989, pp.169-71.

growing areas!); people accused before the courts did not have neighbours as accomplices (as if the lives of respectable working people can be judged by the activities of the accused); the promotional literature about New Zealand did not promote neighbourliness (as if that fully defined the cultural heritage of the settlers). Fairburn may be able to demonstrate that community bonds were weaker than those in the village life in the old world, but that is a different thing from demonstrating 'atomization'.

With transience, an important element in the Fairburn thesis, we encounter geographical determinism in another guise. Again, the social consequence of this cannot simply be read from the figures. There is an Australian local study which throws light on the matter. Nancy Renfree has studied friendly societies in the Victorian goldmining town of Castlemaine, where in the 1870s 63% of the adult males were members. After the great rush of the 1850s, the town's population fell and then stabilized. Even so, transience remained high. At any one time the membership of the societies was made up in roughly equal parts of transients and a core of 'persisters', who remained members for 15 years or more. Among the persisters in the 1870s, 80% had kin in the town — and this only 20 years after its foundation. The persisters existed in all the social groups from which membership was drawn — shopkeepers and traders, miners, artisans and labourers.<sup>8</sup> This finding complements the conclusion of a recent study of the Melbourne labour market in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here, the high rate of casualty in employment affected both skilled and unskilled workers. Each enterprise had a core of regular employees of all grades of skill, and beyond this workers were hired and fired according to fluctuations of trade.<sup>9</sup>

Fairburn wants us to see transience as generally enervating. But when we learn that the figures are constituted from a core of persisters and a rapidly moving periphery, then we see that transience is not the enemy of stability but the definer of it, and the history of colonial society could be conceived as the emergence of persisters and their relationship with the rest of the population. There is much material in Fairburn's book to illuminate the theme of the settled and unsettled. The puzzle of the book is why Fairburn allows the characteristics of the unsettled world to stand for the whole.

Dr Renfree's study of the friendly societies make another important point: of the great array of friendly societies in Britain the only sort to take root in Australia were the so-called associated orders, which could cope with the high level of transience. These were national federations of lodges, like Manchester Unity, with branches throughout the country. A man could move districts and carry with him his membership and his entitlement to medical care and sick pay. The lodges which were not re-established in Australia were those based in a single locality. These depended for their financial viability on a high degree of stability amongst the members.

Fairburn claims that friendly societies, mechanics institutes, trade unions and

8 N.S. Renfree, 'Migrants and Cultural Transference: English friendly societies in a Victorian goldfield town', PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1983.

9 J. Lee and C. Fahey, 'A Boom for Whom? Some developments in the Australian labour market, 1870-1891', *Labour History*, 50 (1986), pp.1-27.

sporting clubs were only weakly established in New Zealand. This may be so. What he does not see is that Australia and New Zealand, as nineteenth-century foundations, acquired as part of their inheritance these new mechanisms of association, which had been developed in the first industrial nation, where there was a rapid rise and movement of population, and traditional association and ties were breaking down. Public meetings and public associations, where men met more or less as equals, were supplanting the informal organization of patronage, kinship and neighbourhood. The social disruption of new settlement in Australia and New Zealand was lessened because the mechanisms of organizing strangers did not have to be learnt. In Australia, at any rate, all these institutions flourished and became more significant than they were in the society of their origins. The Mechanics Institutes, formed first in the great towns of England and Scotland, reappeared in the straggling townships and even in the open countryside of Australia. There were finally more of them there than in Britain.

Fairburn's evidence of the weakness of such associations in New Zealand is ambivalent. The proportion of friendly society membership — 8% of the male work force in the 1870s — is certainly much lower than in Victoria or New South Wales. However, on this and much else I would like to see the figures broken down for town and country. (In his characteristically honest way Fairburn reports that most New Zealanders did not live in the circumstances where they were most at risk of atomization.)<sup>10</sup> In Victoria with a 25% membership rate colony-wide, the suburbs of Melbourne and the goldfield towns had memberships of 50-60%. On the other hand, when Fairburn tries to demonstrate how long early settlements were left in an atomized state, his own evidence refutes the argument. Towns that have to wait two years for an Anglican church, five years for a Mechanics Institute, or ten years for a lodge are, in fact, acquiring these facilities rapidly.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the figures for Sunday School membership (52% in 1871 rising to 70% in 1901) strike me as amazingly high.<sup>12</sup>

A new society founded when the metropolitan society was organized solely by patronage, rank and kinship had much greater difficulty in re-establishing the social order. We see something of this in early New South Wales with endless, debilitating wrangles about honour and precedence among the would-be gentlemen and the overthrow of a governor. This situation was general in the colonial world of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, where governors were regularly defied and factionalism was intense and damaging. Such a situation perhaps warrants the term 'chaos'. Fairburn uses it for a high level of drunkenness and litigation, and in this reveals himself paradoxically as a quintessential New Zealander, as defined by the Littledene school.

The fact that the new institutions of the nineteenth century were so rapidly transported to a new environment explains in part why Australia and New Zealand, especially in the cities, looked so similar to Britain. But was the similarity superficial rather than real? One set of organizations to re-form in the

<sup>10</sup>Fairburn, pp.173-5.

<sup>11</sup>ibid., pp.182-3.

<sup>12</sup>ibid., p.185.

new society was the trade unions, Trades and Labour Councils, and the Labor Party. Some historians, reading backwards to social structure from these institutions, presume that class had become as significant in the new society as in the old. In my view, the most effective part of Fairburn's book is his refutation of this approach. He assumes that the case for class can be better sustained for Australia, but the trajectory of the labour movement in Australia is quite similar to the one he plots in New Zealand: the sudden growth of unions in the 1880s, a comprehensive defeat in the maritime strike, and a rapid collapse in the 1890s. From this crisis, however, emerged the Labor Party. In the 1890s the labour movement was operating effectively at the political level with little or no organization of its industrial base. The unions began to grow again with the return of prosperity around 1900 and in this reorganization the Labor MPs, with their salaries and gold passes for the railways, played an important part. The most rapid growth of the unions, however, occurred after the introduction of arbitration and wages boards in the early twentieth century. As in the New Zealand case, we are left to wonder how complete the trade union organization would have been if the state had not taken a hand.

The social structures of New Zealand and Australia were much more alike than either was like the society which provided the model, and in the Australian case at least, quite frequently the personnel of the labour movement. From a New Zealand perspective, Fairburn calls the much larger Australian cities 'conurbations'.<sup>13</sup> However, Melbourne and Sydney in the 1880s were very different from the industrial cities of northern England and Scotland, which were the heartland of the British labour movement. There was no heavy industry, and factories were generally small; in these essentially commercial cities there was a great mixture of trades, occupation and status — certainly not an industrial proletariat. Despite the high proportion of population in the cities, the Labor Party could not acquire a majority by appealing only to city dwellers. It had to make up the numbers by winning country seats and to do that it appealed to the small farmer and the would-be farmer — a rather different clientele from the one for which it was designed. The paradox of Australian history, as set out by Geoffrey Bolton, is that a society with a social structure similar to the United States operated with the class institutions of the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

In common with Fairburn, I feel that the distinctive characteristics of these new societies are not caught by many of the categories and explanations usually used. With isolation, transience and atomization, however, I think he took a wrong turning. In contrast to the geographical determinism of these formulations, his account of the sudden rise of the labour movement is quite idealistic: a strong, imported ideology which took hold.<sup>15</sup> This is the line of approach which I think will lead us to an understanding of the distinctive character of our dependent societies. I thought I could claim Miles Fairburn as a fellow traveller when I read the quotation from Charles Brasch with which he begins his book:

<sup>13</sup>ibid., p.125.

<sup>14</sup>G. Bolton, 'How we got to here', in T. van Dugteren, ed., *Rural Australia: the other nation*, Sydney, 1978, p.36.

<sup>15</sup>Fairburn, p.124.

'colonies begin as crudely broken off fragments of parent societies: the impulse behind their foundation generally includes an urge to realise more fully some part of the implicit ideal purpose of that society. The effort of settling new country, however, usually exhausts the urge, and the colony once established easily drifts into a stagnating existence as a dull provincial reflection of the parent society, with its own comfort as its chief concern.' That formulation has no need of atomization — unless Fairburn considers that the individualistic values of the Victorians — hard work, saving, self-help, respectability — are in essence atomistic; then the triumph of these values in the antipodes has nothing to do with isolation, poor roads and transience: they triumphed basically because the settlers wanted them to.

JOHN HIRST

La Trobe University

## New Zealand Geographer

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