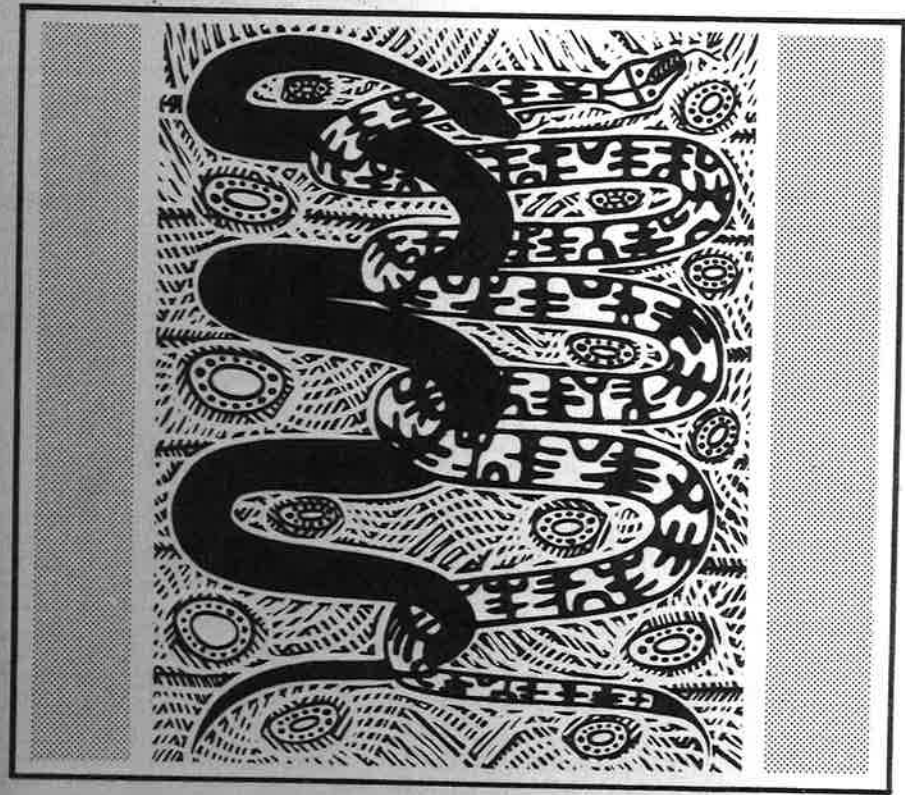


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## review essays

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### Family Traditions — Doug Owram

**A Canadian Review of Brian Head and James Walter (Eds.)** *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988, 397pp.

This collection edited by two Griffith University professors is an ambitious work. In some fifteen essays it seeks to set out for both the specialist and the more general reader the broad sweep of Australian intellectual movements in the twentieth century. This is made even broader in scope by their sensible definition of an intellectual as, to use Richard Hofstadter's term, someone whose work is 'critical, creative and contemplative'. (p.4) This means that not only academics but certain types of journalists, social critics, writers and others are included. The topics covered within this definition range from the position of women within intellectual movements to reminiscences and commentaries by active participants in various movements, to broad thematic essays on such themes as liberalism and conservatism. Though the quality of the individual essays varies to a degree, the work as a whole is impressive and the emphasis on 'movements' provides the editors with a theme that gives the work a certain coherence. Indeed, it is interesting how certain strong themes recur from one essay to the next.

The main purpose of this essay, however, is not to undertake a critical assessment of what is obviously a work of high quality and of considerable significance. As a Canadian intellectual historian I have only a passing acquaintance with Australian history. Rather, the opportunity for me to review this book is really an opportunity to use it as a point of departure for comments from afar on the similarities and differences in Canadian and Australian intellectual history. It was a rather brave challenge for the editors to issue but it was also an interesting one to take up. For this book does raise many questions in my mind about the comparative intellectual histories of our two countries. We have many themes in common in this area and it may very well be that we should be much more cognisant of each other if we are to advance understanding of our own national patterns of thought.

The parallels begin at the most general level. Firstly, in both nations there has been a constant feeling among intellectuals that they are somehow treated more badly, more indifferently, than in other more cultured societies. The concept of a nation of philistines which echoes through intellectuals' comments in this work are something very familiar to those who have looked at Canadian history. Even the

indifference, even scorn, towards the relevance of intellectual history is parallel, as the Preface to *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society* makes clear. 'Australian intellectuals?' remarked one colleague to the editors. 'That will be a thin book'. (p.vi) These are words that all too closely parallel those of a Canadian intellectual historian who some years ago wrote 'there are some professional historians who remain openly satirical of the very idea of the existence of Canadian intellectual history [Karr, 1975, p.431]'.

Yet in both countries this anti-intellectualism may have been overstated. As Brian Head indicates in the introduction, many of the trends pointed to with disdain by intellectuals about Australia are, in fact, common to modern industrial societies. Even given the very real limitations of small populations and the absence of a leisured and educated aristocracy, the intellectual movement has been central to the evolution of both societies. The comments in the above paragraph really state more about the limitations of the historical imagination than about the actual course of history.

A second point of comparison brought out by this volume concerns the obsession with nationalism and the national identity which has shaped the writing of intellectual history (and the nature of thought generally) in both Canada and Australia. In part this is a reflection of the absence of traditional emphasis on what is often termed the history of ideas, that is, the history of formal thought. More importantly, however, the obsession with nation and national identity and such related counterparts as 'the cultural cringe' reflects the relative youth of both nations and the longstanding ambivalence towards the Imperial experience.

Thirdly, as this is a work about intellectual *movements* it is natural to look at the way in which intellectual groups in both countries have organised themselves and how those organisations have evolved over the years. This is especially important in the twentieth century for, as this work perceptively notes, there is a danger of confusing professionalisation with intellectualism. To understand the course of ideas in the modern world it is necessary to see clearly the relationship between ideas and influence, between idealism and self-aggrandisement.

Within this broad theme there is much to compare. As nations established within the framework of the British imperial system Canada and Australia had an intellectual base with much in common. Not only did this mean a similar British inheritance which included everything from Locke through Blackstone, but a continual imbibing at the wells of British culture. This imbibing was, moreover, specific as well as general. Though not talked about in this book in any detail, Australian universities, likewise Canadian, graduated few PhDs until after World War Two. Thus Australian and Canadian universities were staffed by those who received their higher education abroad. This meant a penchant for Scottish and English universities. Thus, as Joan Clarke indicates, Australian science drew its inspiration from the British Baconian traditions brought over by individuals who had studied from the British masters. A.B. McKillop (1979) and Carl Berger (1983) have demonstrated the same thing to be the case in Canada.

Further, the biographical details of individual academics which emerge in this

volume are strikingly similar to many of their Canadian counterparts. Home-town boy (or, rarely, girl) heads off to mother country to be trained; returns home with ideas of Keynes, or Carlyle, Bosanquet or Laski, or whatever other figure might be chosen, and transposes that training to the Dominion setting. Indeed, sometimes the individuals are even the same. Thus Herbert Heaton left Melbourne to take up a post at Queen's University in Canada. Thus Australians concerned about the nature of sociology consulted with R.M. McIver of Columbia who had moved there from the University of Toronto.

Important though these common British ties are there is another aspect to consider. Ideas are, of course, responsive to the economic, social and geographic environment. Rocky Mountains and Great Barrier Reef notwithstanding, Canada and Australia presented similar conditions in this regard. The twentieth century saw both evolve rapidly from agrarian-'frontier' societies to urban-industrial ones. Both thus had to face the attendant social and political issues at roughly the same time. The responses were in most cases similar and in some instances identical. Most dramatic in this regard was the rapid growth of state interventionism and economic planning during World War Two. Both countries moved the new professional coterie of economists from the outside into the corridors of the civil service. From there these 'bureaucratic reconstructionists', as James Walter terms them (p.251), sought to remake the economy of their two countries under the assumption that their knowledge made it possible at last to control events. Both countries even came out at the end of the war with a White Paper promising, in slightly different terms, a secure and planned economy that would provide full employment and avoid the horrors of the recent depression.<sup>1</sup> It would be interesting to see to what degree they were aware of each other's progress and to what degree ideas were exchanged.

Assuming this book to be balanced in its presentation of the Australian intellect, however, there are also recurring differences. Class, though not directly a theme of the book, keeps reappearing throughout as basic to any understanding of Australian intellectual movements. Though class has belatedly made an appearance in Canadian historical writing it has, to date, been only peripheral to Canadian intellectual history. It is really present only to the degree that we note the dominance of the vast and hegemonic middle class in the formation of Canadian ideas.

This theme of class, of course, takes us to one of the basic mythical points of differentiation between Australia and Canada. We have tended to emphasise a conservative tradition in such themes as the loyalists and their rejection of the American revolution; in French Canada and its adherence until recently to traditional conservative values. Intellectual historians have followed this national mythology by focusing on the conservative aspects of Canadian historical thought.<sup>2</sup> Even our discussions of socialism have seen a sort of common bond between traditional Canadian conservatism and modern socialism. Both have stood, it has argued, against the soulless materialism of liberal technocracy represented by modern capitalism and the United States.

This difference of emphasis in the two nations has shown up most clearly perhaps in the founding years of academic historical writing. In Australia, my impression is of a liberal-reformist tendency in the writing challenged on the left by various writers espousing such themes as radical nationalism.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the debate has been carried on until recently at least between a centrist liberal-nationalist school and a conservative one. Further, that conservative school which included such people as Donald Creighton and Harold Innis may have had the more fundamental influence on Canadian historiography. In distinct contrast to Australia such conservatives as Harold Innis captured the hearts of the new left of the 1960s with his very elemental message that Canadians are different from Americans.

It is hardly surprising that Australia, with what one author terms its egalitarian-populist mythology, would emphasise class to a greater degree than have Canadians for whom class distinction has never been a major issue. What is surprising, however, is the absence from this volume of one of the most powerful forces for ideas in the history of the world - religion. Aside from an essay by Max Charlesworth on 'Australian Catholic Intellectuals' which focuses on a particular issue, religion is effectively absent from this work that ranges over so much else.

This contrasts sharply with Canadian writing where the great theological debates of the late Victorian era, the rise of Christian social movements in the twentieth, and the secularisation of society in the same years is seen as central to understanding both the evolution of the Canadian psyche and of successor intellectual movements.<sup>4</sup> Harold Innis, the great Canadian economist, once referred to his colleagues as members of the new priesthood and as the new millennialists.<sup>5</sup> It was a perceptive summation of the way in which old hopes were being transferred to new professions and new intellectuals. It would be surprising to me if religion didn't play an equally important part in Australian intellectual movements. The Church, after all, was one of the most powerful of all organisations and was seen at least until the twentieth century as the central repository of ethical advice, moral judgement and unbiased judgement.

Other parallels could be drawn and other differences noted. Even these few examples, however, demonstrate two things. First, whatever gaps may exist, this wide-ranging book has much to offer as a groundwork for understanding that intellectual movements have been important in Australian history. Second, there is much to be learned by Australians and Canadians alike if we avoid parochialism and look at what is happening beyond our own borders. Our histories may have more in common than we have assumed.

## Notes

1. On the Canadian side this has been an area of especial interest to me. See Owrām (1986) and also Granatstein (1982).
2. See Wise (1965); also McKillop (1979) and Berger (1970). See also a philosopher's quotation between Conservatism and Canadian Nationalism in Grant (1965).
3. See Wells in Head & Walter (1988, pp.214-34).

4. See most recently Cook (1985).

5. Innis (1933) provides one example of this sort of comment.

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