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## 1988: History and the Bicentenary — Tony Bennett

The most significant event of the Bicentenary, Ken Baker has suggested, was not any of those initiated by the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) - not even the re-enactment of the First Fleet's arrival in Sydney Harbour - but one organised by a university professor, Claudio Veliz, in arranging for a chain of Birthday Beacons to illuminate the length and breadth of Australia. Why so? Because whereas the ABA, in providing a range of programmes to appease the demands of special interest groups (ethnic communities, feminists, trade unions, youth, Aborigines), had 'emphasised the diversity of Australians without a balancing emphasis on the overarching unity and identity of the nation', Birthday Beacons 'symbolised an essential unity underlying the diversity of Australians' (Baker, 1988/9, p.48). It was, moreover, authentically the creation of the Australian people themselves rather than an artificial celebration imagined into existence by a central bureaucracy. 'The people', as John Carroll puts it, 'made it happen' as 'the nation gave itself the biggest birthday party in history', communing, seemingly, directly with itself as 'the line of beacons spread, light by light, down the eastern seaboard and deep into the country, all in carefully timed sequence, in order to carry the fire clockwise around the entire continent' (Carroll, 1988/9, p.47).

It was in these terms that the *IPA Review*, a self-styled journal of right-wing opinion and the main publishing organ of the Institute of Public Affairs, offered its first critical retrospective on the Bicentenary. Praising its own contributions to the Bicentenary for their celebration of national unity - for Claudio Veliz, John Carroll and Ken Baker are all associated with the IPA - it slammed the ABA's programmes while also, and with particular venom, condemning 'the rewriting of Australian history' perpetrated by *A People's History of Australia since 1788* for the vilification of the Australian past which its 'black spot treatment' entailed (Hirst, 1988/9, p.49-51).

All of this held few surprises since it amounted to little more than a confirmation of the prospective critique the IPA had offered of the Bicentenary long before it happened. Conceived, initially, under the slogan *The Australian Achievement*, the ABA had, by 1981, replaced this with *Living Together* - a change of emphasis confirmed by the Hawke government when it replaced the Fraser administration in 1983. The development of the ABA's programmes over the next two years, in witnessing a harmonisation of its objectives with the consensus, multicultural nationalist rhetoric of the Hawke government, led, in 1985, to the IPA's first blistering attack on the Bicentenary. Conceived, it was argued, as an exercise in self-denigration - and even self-hatred - the planned Bicentenary, in embracing a 'warts and all' approach to Australian history, was condemned for missing the opportunity 1988 presented of preparing the nation for its forward advance by celebrating its past achievements. Ken Baker even offered

a table of themes stressed by the ABA at the expense of those ignored: multiculturalism versus migrant assimilation, Aboriginal culture versus British heritage, women's activities versus the family, trade unions versus private enterprise - all straightforward enough oppositions, although the reasoning becomes hard to follow when a stress on the arts, youth and the aged are juxtaposed, respectively, to the neglect of the Anzacs, freedom of association and democracy (Baker, 1985).<sup>1</sup>

There are grounds for satisfaction in the prospect of right-wing intellectuals driven to embrace a bowdlerised version of 1970s-style structuralist myth critique to support their fulminations against the Bicentenary. There is also pleasure in the spectacle of right-wing discourse - which characteristically wallows in national celebrations like a hippopotamus in a mud-bath - chastising 1988 as the one that got away. Yet there is also something perplexing in this. For if right-wing opinion has claimed that the Bicentenary eluded its grasp, most voices on the left, in forswearing not to take part in the Bicentenary, have disclaimed any grip on it whatsoever, writing it off as nationalist and, therefore, axiomatically, conservative.

Toward the end of 1987, Colin Mercer, sensing that too many political constituencies had simply abandoned the Bicentenary to its own devices, urged the readers of *Australian Left Review* to become involved in the Bicentenary in order to give its 'definitions of national life in the past and future a distinctive inflection of our own' (Mercer, 1987). This drew the immediate wrath of Andrew Milner who, with his Trotskyist eye fixed firmly on the prospect of international socialism, argued that to make any concessions to nationalism was to fraternise with the enemy. (Milner, 1987). *Arena* carried the debate over into its first issue of 1988 with Verity Burgmann picking up Milner's refrain in objecting that 'nationalism in an advanced capitalist country like Australia today is a conservative ideology that defends the status quo against criticism and contestation from within' (Bergmann, 1988, p.9). If, in the view of the IPA, the Bicentenary had shunned the task of projecting a unified national community, nationalism, for Burgmann, is inherently tacky stuff since, in fabricating such a community, it serves to mask inequalities of class, race and gender.

This is a little odd coming from one of the editors of *A People's History of Australia since 1788*.<sup>2</sup> For while, as Bergman tells us elsewhere, this history project does seek to deconstruct the ground of the nation, to break down its unities and restore the conflictual histories of the oppressed which its dominant myths silence or distort, the very title - with its reference to both the nation and its people - indicates that nationalist terms of reference have not been entirely jettisoned (Bergmann, 1988a). The assertion, found in the introduction to all the volumes in this history, that 'we can only understand Australian history by analysing the lives of the oppressed', is, Marian Aveling notes, 'a nationalist assertion' which 'claims Australian history in the name of the Australian people' (Aveling, 1986, p.166).

Nor when Burgman tells us that the intention had been to complete the project so as to allow its publication in 1986, thereby avoiding any association

with the Bicentenary, is her fastidiousness in this regard altogether convincing. For it is naive to imagine that either the nature or the effects of a bicentenary can be limited to the year officially marked for celebration. In the case of 1988, its effects preceded its occurrence by a decade or so in view of the debates which accompanied its planning and as, nearer the time, it was given its discursive dress rehearsal by means of the promotional machinery of the ABA. Nor, now that 1988 is over, can the Bicentennial be said to have passed away; it has an after-life guaranteed for it in the retrospectives it has already started, and will continue, to generate as well as in its numerous permanent bequests to the cultural map of the nation. To imagine that a national celebration might be boycotted by a mere nicety of publication dates is, in other words, to radically misunderstand the nature of such celebrations which, rather than being reducible to a definite time-bound set of events, serve more as reference points for a swarm of cultural initiatives governed by longer periodicities than the punctuation points in national time they take as their occasions.

Moreover, as events intended to mark the historical time of the nation, the initiatives such celebrations call forth are predominantly historical in orientation. While this has been true of earlier Australian celebrations,<sup>3</sup> 1988 has stimulated the proliferation of historical representations on a scale hitherto unprecedented. Apart from the oppositional and quasi-official histories offered by different wings of the academy, historical discourse has multiplied its outlets considerably. History kits have been provided for schools; there have been countless historical re-enactments ranging from the First Fleet through re-traversals of the explorers' tracks by boats, planes, horses and even camels to innumerable local pageants; the lives and work of historians have been transformed into dramatic productions; new museums have been opened while existing ones have arranged special exhibitions; new heritage sites have been proclaimed; television has offered its quota of documentaries, both critical and celebratory, and an endless stream of historical mini-series; special conferences have been held and chairs of Australian history bequeathed while, at the level of ephemera, everyday life has been historicised through and through - from political slogans on cartons of eggs to Bicentennial Diaries in which every date, in being marked by an event from the past, is inserted relentlessly into national historical time. Quite enough, as Graeme Davison suggests, to prompt sympathy with Nietzsche's contention that it is possible for a nation to suffer 'an excess of history' (Davison, 1988, p. 75).

What are we to make of all this history? Not an easy question to answer, and not least because it requires a differentiated approach capable of distinguishing different regions of historical discourse, the modes of their circulation, their likely audiences and fields of use as well as identifying the different time scales over which their impact should be assessed. *Making the Bicentenary*, however, offers the resources from which some preliminary conclusions might be drawn. Published as a special issue of *Australian Historical Studies*, it offers a useful set of competing descriptions and assessments not only of the main history projects which comprised academic historians' chief contributions to, or critiques of, the

Bicentenary but also of the much more heterogeneous - and uneven - yield of the burgeoning field of public history. In this it constitutes a quite exceptional - and welcome - publication in not merely airing some of the controversies which have racked the profession as it has geared itself up for or against the Bicentenary but, as Richard White has noted, in its 'conception of the historian not simply as someone who investigates the past but as someone who is also able to investigate the many ways in which a society makes use of the past' (White, 1988/9, p. 44).

In the first of these respects, the collection offers a probing and insightful account of 'history in the making'. The most interesting essays, from this perspective, are those which tell the story (or their stories) of the production of *Australians: A Historical Library*, a massive undertaking - 'one of the most heavily funded single historical projects to take place in this country' is how Kay Daniels describes it (Daniels, 1988, p. 131) - consuming a good deal of the energies of the history academy, and particularly of its higher echelons, over the past decade.<sup>4</sup> There are 'insider stories' telling of the frustrations of a project which, while committed to 'the kind of history newly attempted in the age of democracy',<sup>5</sup> seems scarcely to have implemented democratic principles in its management style or editorial procedures; stories of copy altered at the last moment, and without consultation, to fit in with un-negotiated editorial formats, and stories of the forms of partiality and exclusion perpetrated by a management committee dominated by an aging and largely masculine professoriate.

While these are not overly-personalised complaints (they are, more often than not, exercises in rueful self-recrimination rather than criticisms of others), it is Kay Daniels who comes closest to accounting for the ambivalent yield of the project in pin-pointing the contradictions associated with its founding conception:

In the production of *Australians: A Historical Library* two somewhat contradictory impulses have intersected: the wish to produce something imposing and commemorative in the bicentenary year, and the wish to write a history which emphasises themes and social groups which have in past histories been most neglected - in particular, to assert the importance of the experience of Aborigines, women and ordinary people. The volumes fulfill the first intention. They are imposing books, superbly illustrated, books to keep and hand down. Too heavy to hold easily, too easily soiled, they are for display rather than for everyday use... Yet they are also intended to be 'people's histories', histories of everyday life dedicated to just those people who are least likely to be able to afford them. The 'new history' of the text is encased in a form which reinforces the old idea that history is a luxury consumer item, a 'collectable' [Daniels, 1988, p. 131].

Yet, while this undoubtedly underscores a major limitation of the project, it also suggests some respects in which its achievements might be more positively valued. In 1976, an investigator reporting to the US Senate Committee examining *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial* had the following to say of a publication, *America's Birthday*, put out by the People's Bicentennial Commission, a New Left group concerned to introduce critical perspectives on American history into the US Bicentennial celebrations:

There are authentic-looking pictures in here of colonial America, and some rather good art work, and there is a quotation from Thomas Jefferson... If one of your kids brought it home and you just leafed through it, you would think, well, this is great... It looks like something *American Heritage* might have done [Cited in Rozenzweig, 1985, p.7].

Even its most hostile reviewers concede that *Australians: A Historical Library* does succeed, albeit patchily, in incorporating critical perspectives and in according space to the unheard histories of marginalised groups. It is not enough, however, merely to say this; account has then also to be taken of precisely the fact that this is accomplished within a publishing format - somewhere between coffee-table book publishing and glossy encyclopaedia - that would normally be given over entirely to sanitised versions of the past. As a quasi-official history that will undoubtedly serve as a standard reference source for many years to come, some heart should be taken from the fact that - with all its tensions and shortcomings - it has occupied a ground which might otherwise have been completely dominated by the monochrome discourse of a celebratory nationalism.

It is for this reason, I think, that easy comparisons with *A People's History of Australia since 1788* should be avoided. The two projects are quite different in terms of the publishing registers in which they play and the time-scales over which their effects are likely to be registered. Conceived in opposition to *Australians: A Historical Library*, *A People's History of Australia since 1788* offers a cheaper, handier and much more instantly usable resource. Rejecting the arbitrary focus on particular years enjoined by the 'slice' approach of *Australians: A Historical Library*, it also avoids the forms of historical voyeurism associated with the attempt to conjure the sphere of the everyday back into ethnographic and pictorial existence. Yet, in doing so, it falls into another pitfall, that of essay after essay which 'tells the story' of selected aspects of Australian life (crime, gambling, sport, schooling) in short narratives covering extended periods (sometimes the whole period since European settlement), a format which, apart from its repetitiveness, often conveys the impression that unsustainable generalisations are being made.

In this respect, both projects share a similar weakness which Jill Julius Matthews puts her finger on - that they are, in their different ways, very conventional instances of history writing which scarcely problematise at all the nature of the sources they use or the ways in which they interpret and re-present them. Both, that is to say, are empiricist projects. In their shared commitment to restore to history the everyday lives of ordinary Australians and marginalised groups, both - as Matthews puts it - sustain 'the belief that the past as it was experienced as the everyday present by individuals can be recovered and presented unmediated by the historian: that the documents, whether diaries, letters or oral interviews, can speak for themselves - and be heard and understood in the same way by the present-day reader' (Matthews, 1988, p.96). While critical work which questions such assumptions has not been lacking in 1988 - *Island in the Stream*, an ABA commissioned project, is relentlessly probing in its relations to the raw materials from which national myths are made

(see Foss, 1988) - very little of it has come from historians. Perhaps, however, this is asking too much. Their shortcomings notwithstanding, both *Australians: A Historical Library* and *A People's History of Australia since 1788* represent major and sustained interventions into the discourse of the Bicentenary which few other academic disciplines can rival. Certainly, by comparison, sociology's contribution - Claudio Veliz's *Birthday Beacons* - looks, as it was, a one-night fizzer.

How much all this rewriting of history has affected the broader field of public history is a moot question. Chris Healy, reviewing a range of ephemeral historical publications, notes the lack of a consensual voice among these. Suggesting this is because 'there are no safe metaphors for Australian history with which the popular histories can work - no primary sense of loss, no overwhelming nostalgia, no consistent romanticism, no acceptable closure of memory, no fixed truth value', he concludes that the popular histories of 1988 have 'put a complex and contradictory historical culture within the grasp of many readers' (Healy, 1988, p.192).

Peter Cochran and David Goodman offer a different and, to my mind, more probing assessment of what they call the 'tactical pluralism' which has characterised the official discourse of the Bicentenary. Tracing the political controversies which dogged the ABA, beleaguered from the right for celebrating the diversity of the nation rather than its unity and from the left for representing that diversity as an essentially harmonious rather than a conflictual one, they argue that the response was an attempt to embrace all voices within the celebrations. However, in failing to accord any of these priority over others, the result was an official discourse which abdicated any responsibility for saying anything in its own voice. The argument is carried by a telling analysis of the Travelling Exhibition which, with a budget of \$37 million, was not only one of the largest ventures sponsored by the ABA but, in 'showing the nation to the nation' by taking an exhibition of Australian life, culture and history on a 20,000 kilometer tour, embracing both town and country, was one of the major symbolic centrepieces of the Bicentenary. Yet the Exhibition was, Cochran and Goodman suggest, peculiarly devoid of any distinctive or authoritative statements concerning the nation's past, its identity or future trajectory. Rather, committed to a democracy of the object, including the bric-a-brac of everyday life but without any accompanying commentary to suggest a meaning, and in juxtaposing diverse objects - Captain Cook's telescope, an Aboriginal breastplate, a stump jump plough and a dingo trap - without suggesting any order of connection or priority between them, the result was a postmodernist text which, while endlessly citing the past, at the same time voided that past of any historical significance.

If, however, the sphere of public historical representations was thus dominated by the voice of yuppie designers rather than that of critical historians, Cochran and Goodman are careful not to regard this as entirely a matter for regret. In avoiding any simple affirmative statement of an uncomplicated patriotism, they argue, the Travelling Exhibition did embody 'a distancing from the old stereotypes

and a recognition, in its silences, of the genuine difficulties of speaking in a consensual voice in a complex politically, ethnically, and socially divided society; an authentic pluralism in many ways new to Australian discourse' (Cochrane and Goodman, 1988, p.44). Generalising from this, they suggest that if the cultural logic of the Bicentenary was thoroughly postmodern, reproducing the forms of Australian nationalism, but in a pastiche mode which simultaneously winnowed out their substance, this may well reflect the influence of young urban professionals in signalling their 'rejection of the mono-cultural, suburban, white-bread world of the previous generation' (*ibid*, p.30). While this may not be the kind of national stock-taking Bob Hawke urged on us for 1988, it is, in its way, a review of the national inventory which, in assigning many of its rhetorics to the back-shelves of the past, has not been without its pleasures or its positive effects.

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of 1988, however, was the degree to which it afforded Aborigines an opportunity to offer their own critique of new national inventories in the process of their making. Cochrane and Goodman summarise the respects in which the rhetoric of multiculturalism was bent to an assimilationist strategy in attempts to recast the Bicentenary as a celebration of the entire history of human settlement in Australia:

The official reconstruction of the celebration entailed a shift in emphasis from the voyage of the First Fleet, to all the voyages of arrival to Australia, to all the 'people who have settled this land over many thousands of years'. The most obvious result of this strategy was to include Aborigines in the event to be celebrated and, importantly, to erase some of the distinction between Aborigines and Europeans - to recast the Aborigine (*aborigine*, from the beginning) as a journeyer too, an immigrant like us. This is a levelling strategy - we all go on journeys, it suggests, we are in the end immigrants, and so everyone has an ethnic background: we all therefore have something to celebrate [*ibid*, p.26].

This inclusive invitation was tellingly resisted, and its double-dealing rhetoric just as tellingly exposed, by the slogan governing the Aboriginal protest against the First Fleet re-enactment: *40,000 years don't make a Bicentennial*. 'Audible, and visible in most telecasts on the day, extending later into media commentary, news items, current affairs shows, and the television archive of future Aboriginal images,' Meaghan Morris argues, '- that protest effectively historicised, on Aboriginal terms, an entrepreneurial national event' (Morris, 1988, p.187). If this was, in Graeme Davison's view, 'the authentic voice of critical history in 1988' (Davison, 1988, p.74), it is also one which seems likely to increase in both volume and confidence. In one of the first critical television retrospectives on the Bicentenary - *Radio Redfern*, broadcast in January 1989 as part of the ABC's *First Australians* series - Australia Day 1988 was retrospectively claimed as 'a good black day'. Perhaps, for Aboriginal peoples, its symbolic importance consisted most in the opportunity it provided, in assembling the largest gathering of Aboriginal peoples since European settlement, for affirming and demonstrating, in what was the dominant refrain of the day, that 'We have survived' - a living critique of those racist discourses that had predicted their distinction. It was one of the nicest of ironies that, a couple of days later, a second ABC Bicentennial

retrospective, *Bicentennial Daze*, featured a segment with a couple of musing stockmen predicting that, while the Aborigines would last for ever, white Australians were just about 'bred out'.

It remains a moot point as to why other groups failed to make a similar dent in the rhetorics of 1988. Perhaps it was a matter of political courtesy, of not wishing to detract from the Aboriginal protest by cluttering the discursive field with other interventions. Or perhaps it was the product of an abstinence born of a disdain for nationalism in all its forms which resulted in the lameness of a left response which could do little more than organise endless 'Not the Bicentennial' parties in a range of Sydney pubs. Whichever the case, the contradictory yield of 1988 should offer food for thought as the celebrations of the millenia and of the centenary of federation approach. For these, no less than 1988, will be events in relation to which boycotting is simply not an option.

### Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of the IPA's interventions in relation to the Bicentenary, see Spearritt (1988).
2. *A People's History of Australia since 1788* consists of four thematically based volumes - *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, *Making a Life*, *Staining the Wattle*, and *Constructing a Culture* - edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee and published by McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Victoria, 1988).
3. For a discussion of this aspect of the 1888 celebrations, see Fletcher (1988).
4. *Australians: A Historical Library* consists of six general history volumes and six reference volumes. The distinctive principle of the general history volumes is the 'slice approach' with three volumes devoted to different aspects of ordinary life and lived experience in three years (1838, 1888 and 1938) while two volumes - *Australians to 1788* and *Australians from 1939* adopt more conventional narrative approaches. The General Editors for these volumes are Alan D. Gilbert and K.S. Inglis with S.G. Foster. The full set of eleven volumes was published by Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, Sydney, in 1987 at \$695 a set. Individual volumes cannot be purchased separately.
5. From the preface to *Historians: A Historical Library*, cited in Matthews (1988).

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