The ‘Whig’ View of Australian History

and other essays
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by A. W. Martin

Introduction by John Hirst
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Preface

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This collection presents some of the writing of my husband Allan Martin which seems to be of enduring significance and which reflects something of the range of his work, including some of the less accessible pieces.

The collection reflects the development of some of his ideas, over a period of forty years, about Australian historiography and society, and is thus a window onto Australian historical debates of that period. Allan's wide interests, collegiality and generosity made him willing to contribute to other people's collections and seminars, even when publication was not in mainstream outlets. It was to a teachers' journal that he finally gave 'The "Whig" View of Australian History'. Having briefly been a secondary school teacher himself, he knew the importance of including teachers in the lively debates of his profession, and of stimulating curiosity and debate about Australian history amongst school teachers and students.

A similar passion to convey an understanding of Australian history to a wide, popular readership drove the general editors and volume editors of the Australian Bicentennial project which resulted in the multi-volume Australians: A Historical Library in 1987. The editorial and writing work took its toll of many, and it delayed Allan's making any effective beginning to his projected biography of Robert Menzies. The only piece here which is associated with the Bicentennial project is the working paper 'A New Middle Class?', which is of continuing relevance to our own society but which is not as easily accessible as are the chapters of the major publication, Australians.

Publication of the piece on provenance, 'Menzies and Appeasement', was delayed by his concern for audience. He despaired of what he saw as a dishonest beat-up in the popular press of an incident concerning Menzies and the mood on the eve of the Second World War. He wanted to provide the public with the documentation and the context to understand those matters better. Controversy and
conflicting views would remain—that is the stuff of a lively intellectual climate—but he strove to have that based on proper use of evidence and context and an honest wish to understand. These principles guided his life as a teacher, administrator and scholar.

I am grateful to the many friends and colleagues who suggested and encouraged this project and helped in various ways. Thanks are due to the editors and publishers who held copyright of some of the original pieces, who all generously granted permission to republish here. Stephanie Hancock ably arranged scanning of the contents and preparation of copy for this book. Edith Binkowski likewise shouldered responsibility for preparing the index.

Thanks are also due to Melbourne University Publishing, with whom Allan had a long publishing history, for their commitment to this volume and for making the process a pleasure. Most of all, my deep appreciation is due to John Nethercote for his friendship with Allan and his professional judgment and expertise in editing this volume.
Introduction: Allan Martin, Historian

John Hirst, Scholar Emeritus, La Trobe University

As a citizen Allan Martin was a quiet supporter of the Labor Party; as a scholar he worked to downplay its role in Australia’s history. He would not have seen anything odd in this because as a social scientist he took his task to be simply to get the history right. With his political sympathies unchanged, he ended his career by writing a biography of Sir Robert Menzies with the support and assistance of Menzies’ daughter.

Allan had the Labor Party in his sights in the title essay of this collection, ‘The “Whig” View of Australian History’. Here he declared his unwillingness to believe that ‘some readily identifiable class or party or cause can mysteriously hold in its keeping the only truth essential for understanding the whole society’. It is hard now to imagine, but when Allan started to write history it was a commonly held view that the Labor Party was the first and only true political party; that before its formation in 1891 politics was a wasteland, and that it alone was the vehicle for realising Australia’s progressive destiny. Allan’s lasting mark on Australian historiography was the demolition of these views.

The ‘Whig’ approach to history was first identified in the writing of English history. The Whigs emerged as a parliamentary grouping in the 1670s in the time of King Charles II. The King had no legitimate children; after his death the throne would pass to his brother James, who was a Catholic. The Whigs wanted to exclude James from the throne; opposed to them were the Tories who thought it was no part of parliament’s role to choose the monarch. The Whigs failed to exclude James, but on his coming to the throne he realised all their fears, and within three years he was forced into exile. His Protestant daughter Mary and her husband William were installed in his place and made subject to the control of parliament. To those writing English history in the nineteenth century, the Whigs seemed to have the future in them; they were supporters of the cause that led to England becoming eventually a liberal and then a democratic state. But the Whigs of the seventeenth century were far from being liberals
let alone democrats. To ignore their changing motivations and to identify them simply as the party of progress that was realising England’s destiny was to write very poor history. This was the Whig fallacy that was nailed by Herbert Butterfield in his book, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931).

‘The “Whig” View of Australian History’, given at seminars around the country in the 1960s, was the most influential paper Allan wrote. He undermined Labor’s privileged place in the historiography by linking it to an approach that had been identified and discredited in England. But as always with Allan, it was a gentle demolition. He praised the historians he was attacking. He did not want to deny the importance of the Labor Party; rather he wanted to take the whole world in which it emerged seriously. The other parties and groupings could not be ignored. He refused to accept that a strong Labor Party was to be explained by the absence or weakness of a middle class. There was too much evidence of the presence in society of a middle class for it to be overlooked in the accounts of politics. Support for progressive legislation came from its ranks as well as from the working class.

Allan learnt his history at the University of Sydney. His first substantial research, conducted for his MA (1952), was an examination of New South Wales politics during the government of George Reid, who was premier from 1894 to 1899. By the very choice of this subject, Allan was putting himself outside the mainstream. To the historians of the Labor Party, Reid owed his position to the Labor Party, which held the balance of power, and any progressive achievements were put down to Labor’s influence. To the historians of Federation Reid was a traitor because of his lukewarm support for that cause as typified in his famous ‘Yes–No’ speech at the first Federal referendum in 1898. Reid was a free-trader and hence in Victorian eyes, to whom protection was the radical cause, he must necessarily be conservative or at best unreliable. It has often been said that Victoria created the Commonwealth and imposed its policies on it; the historians followed in this path and imposed a Victorian view on the history of the Federal movement. This left only a dishonourable place to George Reid, and his natural concern as to whether free trade could survive in the Commonwealth was not appreciated.

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Allan’s study of Reid showed him to be a masterful politician, relying on Labor support but not beholden to that party, and crafting his own bold programme of radical reform. Free trade had become a shibboleth in New South Wales, but in practice the government still levied some customs duties to garner revenue. Reid was a complete free-trader; his plan, which he could not quite accomplish, was to abolish duties altogether and make Sydney a free port. To compensate for the loss of revenue he planned to levy direct taxes on land and income for the first time. This was fiercely resisted by wealthy people and by the protectionists whom Reid typed as the conservative party—a reversal of the Victorian scene and one that Allan savoured. Reid was obscenely fat, earthy, worldly, and unemotional about Federation; he was the polar opposite to Alfred Deakin, the ascetic, high-minded Victorian, who treated Federation as a religious cause.

Having digested Reid, as it were, Allan was well equipped to see Australian history differently.

His doctoral study at the Australian National University (1955) brought Labor’s role into question from another direction: what was politics like in New South Wales before Labor appeared on the scene in 1891? From self-government in the 1850s until the 1890s there were no organised parties and many short-lived governments. This instability seemed to give some credibility to the claim that Labor had brought order and cohesion to politics.

Allan discovered the order in politics before 1890, not as the work of parties, but of factions. They had clear leaders and a constellation of both firm and unsteady supporters, and vied with each other and competed for the allegiance of independents in order to gain office. By the 1880s the social circumstances that supported this system were breaking down; more permanent social divisions were emerging, which led to the emergence of two parties, the free-traders and the protectionists. This was a highly significant finding, for it removed Labor’s claim to primacy and novelty. When Allan published his findings a furious debate ensued over whether the parties of the 1880s were truly parties.

Allan’s conclusions were drawn from a study of the politics of the 1870s and 1880s. Simultaneously at the University of Sydney Peter Loveday was working for his doctorate on the politics of the 1850s and 1860s. They combined forces and together produced the
It was the survival of the correspondence of Henry Parkes, the master manipulator, that had allowed the mysteries of the faction system to be uncovered. Allan was fascinated by Parkes and the opportunities offered by that ‘hall of mirrors’, the Parkes correspondence. He resolved to master it—a huge labour—and produce a biography. *Henry Parkes* appeared in 1980.

Allan was the first doctoral student to graduate in history from the Australian National University. He had a strong sense of being a pioneer, of working in a new field where there were ‘great uncharted areas’. He recognised the power of the inspired guesses of the historians who had preceded him, but he looked forward to a time when we would do without them and all conclusions would be based on thorough research. Hence Allan’s own reluctance to pronounce definitely when the work remained to be done; he offers, as the readers of these essays will discover, what he calls ‘notes’ or a ‘brief, selective and simplistic overview’ with any speculation being signalled as such.

He refused for a long time to allow ‘The “Whig” View of Australian History’ to be published. It circulated in manuscript, copied and recopied on that shiny, slimy and unstable paper which the first photocopiers used. I saw and devoured a copy as a postgraduate student in Adelaide. In Allan’s words this paper was a ‘Thinks piece’ which did not meet his rigorous standards of demonstration and proof. Nor did he want it to be used to type him as a ‘right-wing’ historian opposed to the Left. He finally allowed a journal for teachers to publish it, but insisted that it be labelled ‘A document’, to indicate that it was an occasional piece of no enduring worth.

However, Allan was far from being what is labelled a mindless empiricist, a historian who thinks the answers will emerge when all the evidence is in. His first wife was a sociologist and he thought of himself very definitely as a social scientist. He looked to theory for guidance on social, political and individual behaviour, but always warily and properly so, for if theory always had the answers there would be no need for historians to uncover particularities of time, place, person and chance. He was also alert to the insights comparative studies can bring. His respectful critique of Louis Hartz’s book *The Founding of New Societies* is included in this collection.
Allan’s characteristic mode of working can best be seen in the essay on the middle class of the 1950s, a new field for him which he entered to make a contribution to the Australian Bicentennial project organised by the Australian National University. He starts with the hard evidence, the census, which turns out not to be an unproblematic guide. He knows Michael Young’s work on the rise of the meritocracy, but he quickly brings forward evidence which contradicts it in the Australian case. He is at his most devastating when he examines a study of the professions in Australia which has references to sixty-seven works, ‘but only four of these deal explicitly with Australia, and only two of that four report actual research findings’. He puts the dilemma he and his colleagues face in moving into a new field in this way: ‘We have to ask what ways there are of avoiding mishmashes of speculation and impressionism on the one hand or, on the other, resort to abstract theory tenuously censored by hard evidence.’

The answer lay through the middle, in more real research, and until that was done Allan was happy as ‘an old-fashioned historian’ to respond to questions with ‘I dunno’.

In preparing to write the Parkes biography, Allan read deeply in psychological theory and conducted an honours seminar at La Trobe University in which the theory and the problems thrown up by the Parkes material were argued over. In those halcyon days in the department that Allan founded, other staff were free to sit in on the class. Inga Clendinnen reports in her inaugural Allan Martin lecture that this seminar was ‘the most sustained intellectual adventure’ of her life. Allan’s explorations into how a life should be understood are recorded in the essay ‘In Search of the “Actual Man Underneath”’.

Allan himself regretted that the biography he produced was much closer to an orthodox life and times than he had originally planned. In part he was driven in this direction because he was a pioneer. In England, as he explained, a bold reinterpretor of a leading historical personage can assume that the life is well known. Even in outline Parkes’ life was not well known, and until Allan had worked through all the evidence the details were completely unknown. So the careful social scientist thought it was his first duty to lay out the life. Others, he hoped, would later give bold or speculative interpretations. What he did not say is that the comprehensive account that he has provided will be an effective reality check on such
productions. His conclusion on the use of theory for a biographer was that it can offer sensitisation rather than system.

How Allan saw himself and his profession in mid-career is well conveyed in the essay written in 1974 'The Changing Perspective on Australian History'. He knows all the important books; and he sees himself and his colleagues working jointly to deepen understanding on a more or less agreed agenda for the study of Australian society. That agreement was about to dissolve. There was the new interest in gender and race and the growing lack of interest in high politics in favour of social history and the capturing of the experience of ordinary people. More damaging to Allan's social science project was the open declaration by the Young Turks that objectivity was a mirage and that all history was disguised ideology. In the second half of his professional life Allan had to deal with scholars who made claims based on only partial use of evidence and sometimes on very little evidence at all. As a supervisor and collaborator in joint enterprises he maintained his high standards, gently pushing the ideologues back to the evidence. In private he was sometimes angry and despairing at the unsubstantiated claims made about Parkes and Menzies. He prepared a response to work of this sort just before he died. It is printed here for the first time as 'Menzies and Appeasement: Understanding Provenance in Reading Historical Documents'.

The great work of his last years was the two-volume biography of Menzies. Allan was not particularly interested in Menzies but when offered access to all his papers he saw a great opportunity for he suspected that a good deal of what was said or believed about Menzies was probably false or only partly true. Menzies, as a recent figure, was well known, and the book's quiet achievement is to show a far more varied man than the stereotypes allowed, who is allowed to emerge in this account because of the biographer's commitment to 'patience and generosity in judgment'. How brilliant is Donald Horne's characterisation of Menzies as 'a frozen Edwardian', but can that judgment stand when we learn from 'An Australian Prime Minister in Ireland' that Menzies liked De Valera and that his final judgment on British-Irish relations was: 'They are mad in Dublin, madder still in Belfast, and on this question maddest of all at Downing Street'.

I first knew Allan at the University of Adelaide in the mid 1960s when he was the supervisor of my PhD thesis. He read that and
everything else of substance that I wrote. I began to trespass on his
turf when I wrote on Parkes and New South Wales politics and on
Parkes and Federation. He was most generous when my interpreta-
tions differed from his own. He did not agree with all I wrote, but
when I had assembled what he judged to be compelling evidence he
cheerfully gave up his own view. He remained true to his calling. It
was always his opinion that I valued most.
Abbreviations

AIF—Australian Imperial Force
ANA—Australian Natives’ Association
AVCC—Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee
BMA—British Medical Association
CIA—Central Intelligence Agency
CPD—Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
CRO—Commonwealth Relations Office
FO—Foreign Office
MJA—Medical Journal of Australia
ML—Mitchell Library
NAA—Australian Archives
NLA—National Library of Australia
PC—Parkes Correspondence, Mitchell Library
PRO—Public Record Office
SMH—Sydney Morning Herald
WEA—Workers’ Educational Association
The ‘Whig’ View of Australian History: A Document

This elderly piece appears here simply as a document; its text (even down to the lack of footnote references) is precisely as first written in 1962 for oral delivery to Section E of that year’s ANZAAS conference. It was prepared as a discussion paper in response to an invitation from the organisers of the Section and was never intended for publication. But it acquired subsequently a somewhat spurious notoriety, some pirated versions were circulated, and it is still sometimes vaguely referred to in discussions of Australian historical writing. Ageing historians’ juvenilia can be embarrassing, and this paper is no exception. It may, however, have some quaint interest in its implicit reflection of the distance Australian studies have travelled in the last twenty years; and for that purpose an accurate text is better for the record than the ambiguity of shadowy unpublished versions.

Political history is now unfashionable, and the debate to which I initially addressed myself—how the emergent Labor movement of the nineteenth century should be ‘located’—has been bypassed, or at least decently laid to rest.¹ That debate was a product of the postwar flowering of what is now called the ‘old left’ historiography, and was conducted primarily in terms of that ‘positivist–empiricist orthodoxy’

in which—as younger historians have forcibly told us—my generation had been too carefully trained. Behind this paper there is a tinge of indignation at having been labelled 'counter-revolutionary', or 'bourgeois', merely because one wished to 'get the record straight', a reaction which today would be regarded as impossibly naive. Naive too, in these post-Thompson, post-Connell & Irving days, now seems my crude pseudo-Parsonian discussion of class and of the kind of social history that needed to be 'done' before politics could be 'properly' understood. The emphasis has changed and sophistication has grown mightily. We have seen in the last decade or two the rise of new types of social history whose advances already far outstrip many of the puny recipes one was able to propose in 1962. That is what gives 'the "Whig" View' its most dated air, and that, too, is what promises exciting possibilities if historians—surviving empiricist dodos and new theorists alike—should ever be tempted to turn back and look again at the nineteenth-century political story.

Whether we can talk usefully about 'the Whig view of Australian history' is doubtful. I certainly do not wish to start an endless and profitless argument on this point. It might be possible, though, to speak of some 'whig' interpretations, if we begin by taking this ambiguous phrase in its broadest sense—to refer to certain received or established notions about a given historical field. In the Australian case, one might arbitrarily identify—on different levels of generality—three types of interpretation that might qualify for the title 'whig'. I shall discuss them in descending order of generality, and dismiss the first two very briefly—it is with the third that we shall be chiefly concerned.

There is, in the field of general Australian history, that bias Professor La Nauze summed up in a sentence in 1959—'any general account of Australia still seems more or less off-centre to any student outside N.S.W. or Victoria'. It had seemed for so long that a definite pattern had been discerned in the brief history of European settlement in Australia: though emphases naturally varied, the themes treated by a line of interpreters from Sir Keith Hancock to Professor Greenwood and his collaborators were much the same. But now our colleagues in the west and south are sharply reminding us that there has been significant experience beyond Sydney or the bush. Hence,
for example, the warm greeting that a fellow Western Australian gave to Dr Crowley’s *Australia’s Western Third*:

So many of the themes regarded as more or less basic to Australian history are somehow muted or entirely absent in the west. Capital versus Labour, for instance; after the first lumpers strike in 1899 was settled by a committee of local clergy, trade unions were recognized and arbitration machinery granted without demur by John Forrest’s soundly conservative government. No disputes between squatter and farmer about unlocking the land, no Irish problem, no sectarian rancour bedevilling the issues of education and military conscription. How bucolic, how unsatisfying in its failure to conform to eastern Australian generalisations, how easy to write off this narrative as a chronicle of provincialism!

Though we in the east always did think of South Australia as a rather strange place, it has come as something of a shock to learn from Dr Inglis how strange it is, and from Professor Pike how extraordinary—in terms of the received Australian stereotypes—its origins and early development were. How these newer foci of interest will bear upon general history is not surprising when scholars like Mr Morrison and Dr Bolton strip the wrappings off Queensland. But new bearings certainly are evident: who but a man writing in Adelaide would have thought of calling a history of Australia *The Quiet Continent*, or have tried to open our eyes by firmly setting self-dependent families beside Labour parties in accounting for the peculiar tone of contemporary Australian society?

The accumulating material on the separate communities of this continent constitutes, in fact, something of a nightmare for the potential general historian. He must ask himself, for example, how far it is any longer just to speak of an Australian society or tradition. If he does believe he can talk this way, his crucial problem becomes that of explaining the mystery of unity within diversity: at what points, by what ways and under what pressures, the separate colonial societies have tended to gravitate towards a commonality. This is not the crude old problem of nationalism—it is something far more
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subtle . . . in such matters the inadequacy of eastern (shall we say 'whiggish?') themes as levers of explanation is patent enough.

But if we admit the eastern blinkers and narrow the focus, we come to a second kind of received view. It is defined for us by Dr Gollan. 'Australians of the late 19th and early 20th century' he writes,

assumed that the history of Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century was a record of democratic and political advance. By and large this picture was accepted by the historians who, in the years before the second world war, laid the foundations of Australian historiography. But today it is becoming fashionable to question this idea. In part the questioning is the Australian version of English criticism of the Whig interpretation of British history, based on the more detailed examination of the facts than was possible for earlier historians.

Dr Gollan tells us that he has written his Radical and Working Class Politics 'in the belief that the earlier historians were not so very wrong'.

It is difficult to identify the writings which call into question the plain fact of this political advance—towards wider democracy and a greater degree of social justice—it is, as Dr Serle has put it, one of the great central facts of Australian history, 'which only the eccentric can deny'. Strictly within Dr Gollan's terms of reference, indeed, one would be hard put to contest even the more colourful assertion Mr Fitzpatrick made last year: 'Recent discussion of Australian historiography does not seem to me to have invalidated the concept of progress which the visiting inspectors from France and America, Albert Metin and Victor S. Clarke, made out fifty or sixty years ago, and which Childe and Evatt and other Australian scholars could still detect later on.'

It has certainly been very properly pointed out that there were limits to this progress, and that it was progress that may have been bought at a high cost. Nor have scholars been lacking to remind us that other themes jostle this one for the centre of the stage—the drama of men's efforts to tame an intractable environment, or the new encounter on this ancient continent between rival conceptions

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