

RESENSIES/REVIEWS

Trouble in the Colonies

Review of

D.W.A. BAKER, *PREACHER, POLITICIAN, PATRIOT:
A LIFE OF JOHN DUNMORE LANG*

Melbourne University Press 1998; ISBN 0 522 84822 2.

Some people write biographies of great men they admire for their particular virtues or achievements. Mr. Don Baker has a refreshing approach. He wrote a biography on the life of John Dunmore Lang not because he liked him, but because he did not. The preface introduces the reader to the kind of person he is: "A man to whom truth and falsehood come alike as he can best adapt them to his unmanly purposes." The author uses this quote from one of Lang's opponents at the time to characterise the subject of his biography.

Preacher, Politician and Patriot is a shortened version of the original biography *Days of Wrath*, published by the Melbourne University Press in 1985. At that time Mr. Baker was still reading history at the Australian National University.

Politically correct?

The author shows a keen interest in the Aborigines of Australia not only in this book, but also in *The civilised surveyor: Thomas Mitchell and the Australian Aborigines* (Melbourne, 1997). The epilogue of *Preacher, Politician and Patriot* reveals a similar link. For this purpose it even extends the Lang-biography to the description of the son of his sister's offspring, and a subsequent marriage of a far cousin to a lady from the Ngalia tribe ninety years after Dunmore's death, followed by the birth of three children of mixed descent, in particular. This leads to the concluding words:

So after six generations the blood of the Scottish settlers from Largs has been mingled with that of the original dwellers of Australia. John Dunmore Lang had deeply deplored the terrible wrongs done by his compatriots to the Aboriginal people of Australia; we may well imagine how he would have rejoiced at the birth of Kado, Talbot and Zaba.

This book makes for some interesting reading. In the preface Mr. Baker fulfils the role of prosecutor in the case against John Dunmore Lang, whose body and character are presented to us as dead and assassinated, respectively. In the epilogue the author and subject of the biography supposedly unite on the Aboriginal issue. They both deplore the terrible wrongs perpetrated against other people, making this a rather shaky basis for friendship. It leaves us with the following summary of Mr. Baker's assessment: Dunmore Lang was falsehood incarnate, but a visionary in his being kind to the Aborigines.

Do the contents warrant such a literary climax? Apart from the epilogue, the Aborigines are introduced to the reader at only four places. Two references are less relevant. One place refers to the need for protection against them (p. 85). On page 19 we meet Tommy who has pleaded not guilty on a murder charge, but he probably was guilty. The author describes the events as "the death of a sinner" (p. 21). The controversy surrounding this case does not consider any racial issue, but the uninvited administration of baptism by a Roman Catholic priest. According to the Rev. J.D. Lang, the Aborigine man could not possibly understand the rite or have met the requirements of faith at the time. For this reason Lang and most Presbyterians objected to this.

Lang's views on the Aborigines are described only in a small section of the book. (This may be due to the condensed version, cf. Bridges, *Presbyterian Leaders in 19th Century Australia*, Melbourne 1993, p.19.) In the nineteenth century (leading up to Darwin's evolution theory) it was fashionable among settlers to think about Aborigines as "animals like monkeys" (p. 44). However, Lang respected the Aborigines as human and appreciated some of their intellectual and cultural abilities. He resented the ruthless murder of Aborigines by both convicts and free settlers. "All the waters of New Holland", he said, "would be insufficient to wash away the stain of blood from the hands of some gentlemen of good repute." (p. 44) In 1838 when many were horrified at the execution of seven whites who had killed twenty-eight Aborigines, Lang wondered whether God was not punishing the colony by means of a drought because of its dealings with the blacks (p. 62).

Lang opposed the idea of civilising the Aborigines in order to prepare them to accept Christianity. His evangelical views on this topic led him to believe that the Gospel should be brought to the Aborigines in their culture. Christianity would inevitably bring civilisation, but nineteenth century Western culture would not necessarily bring Christianity or improvement. For this reason he advocated that missionaries assimilate with Aborigines, win their trust and proclaim the Gospel (p. 45).

Presbyterian preacher

In 1865, Lang's synod of New South Wales was one of the four groups of Presbyterians meeting in New South Wales. The meeting was characterised by Gospel preaching and missionary work, and was flexible in its adherence to traditional Presbyterian forms (p. 184). Baptist, Lutheran and Congregationalist served as Presbyterian ministers and before union the church did not have an official relationship with any mother denomination in Scotland. In some respects Lang's synod appears to resemble some aspects of the modern Australian Presbyterian evangelicalism.

The Rev. John Dunmore Lang appeared evangelical-minded in his moral crusades against immorality in both the Church and society. In doing so he was a very practical and sensible man: If the government were to establish a colony with inequity between the sexes; it would attempt to correct the issue by importing single women of unimpeachable character who "turned out to be dissolute and licentious on their arrival in Sydney" (p. 47). Likewise in later years, he would object to the immigration of Chinese to Queensland, for cultural reasons, but in particular to importing these men without allowing them to bring their wives.

In 1835 he visited Tasmania to consecrate the St. Andrew's Church (now Scott's Uniting Church) in Hobart. Lang opened the church, but more or less preached the charge as well. On his arrival he learned that the Rev. Archibald Macarthur had the habit of what the reverent clergyman claimed to be "holy kissing" the sisters of the Hobart congregation against their wishes. During an interview for confirmation he also showed such an intimate physical interest that a poor girl jumped at his attempts and ran for it. Lang called on

Macarthur who, overwhelmed by sorrow and remorse, resigned the charge and returned to England six months later. This was especially painful as Macarthur had welcomed Lang as minister in Australasia in 1823 (p. 10).

These troubles seemed to point to the state of the Presbyterian Church in the Colonies at the time. In New South Wales these were instrumental in the establishment of Lang's Synod of New South Wales, as opposed to the Presbytery of NSW in the late thirties. On his return from Van Diemen's Land, the Rev. J. Lang was confronted by the testimony of a housemaid, who begged her father to bring her back to Sydney to escape the drunken and riotous behaviour of the perhaps not so reverend John Hill Garven. This clergyman became quarrelsome and attempted to shoot a convict male servant twice, but misfired. In short: enough material for immediate deposition and a jail sentence. But he called the maid a liar and tried to secure the servant's silence by returning him to the government for feigning sickness. Lang obtained his testimony but the Presbytery was ruled by drinking buddies who effectively blocked the charge by technically restricting the witnesses in April 1836. After Lang left for England and Ireland to recruit better men for the ministry in New Holland, the presbytery covered up the case, disproving the charge and stating that far from being drunk and attempting manslaughter Garven had only been exercising a "becoming" firmness towards his servants (pp. 48-63).

One wonders whether the Antichrist was in Rome or in the Presbytery of New South Wales. As moderator of the General Assembly in October 1872 Lang seemed to firmly favour the first position, perhaps with greater ease now that the Presbyterian issue in NSW had greatly improved, despite Free Church conspiracies of a different nature (pp. 195, 96). Lang declared that the latter days were at hand because the one thousand two hundred and sixty years of papal apostasy had ended with the abolition of temporal power of the Holy See by king Victor Emmanuel in 1870. Even as a politician he stated that Rome drove a larger proportion of her motley adherents to the jails and gallows than did any other form of Christianity (p. 132). Needless to say, Lang made enemies and would even make his personal contribution to the jails.

Jailbird patriot

On 30 July 1850 Lang took a seat in the Legislative Council, after overwhelming support in a public show of hands but, strangely, he only obtained 51 percent support in the ensuing polls. He started a new weekly newspaper, the *Press* to further his political cause. Unfortunately, he also defamed a political opponent, for which he eventually served a jail sentence of a few months, or rather a reasonably comfortable apartment in the jail governor's house. As a good Scotsman, Presbyterian and moderator of the Church, he even obtained a resolution of the Synod which "sympathised with the affliction that had befallen him in his labours for the public good".

His long career in politics lasted after his leaving Parliament in 1869, and he continued to exercise influence through his writings. Like Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands, the working class to a large extent support him, accounting for some of his popularity. In politics he fought for a European Republic and even published "Freedom and Independence for the Seven United Provinces of Australia" in 1870 (p. 199). This echoes the seven united Protestant provinces of the Netherlands that liberated themselves from Roman Spain. But Lang fought a lost cause on this particular issue, whilst enjoying large support otherwise and great improvement in both the Church and society until his death in August 1878.

Conclusion

John Dunmore Lang had an interesting life. Perhaps one should agree with Barry Bridges (*Presbyterian Leaders in 19th Century Australia*, Melbourne 1993, p. 34) "that he would have achieved a great deal more, but for the flaws in his character." However, his incorrigible wilfulness and relentless pursuit of top positions may have helped him to persevere where other men would have failed. Whether Christian ministry should be empowered by such traits is an entirely different matter.

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