

A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W. K. Hancock

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One of the connecting strands in this major biography of the Australian historian W. K. Hancock (1898–1988) is the question of his shifting reputation. Hancock was a son of the vicarage, who took out a brilliant First at the University of Melbourne. Arriving in Oxford, via a Rhodes Scholarship, as ‘a dreadfully purposeful young man’, he went on to a glittering career. On the surface his professional reputation might seem unassailable. In a long life, Hancock occupied chairs of history at Adelaide, Birmingham, Oxford and London before seeing out his career at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. He wrote some 20 books, depending how they are counted, including the magisterial *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs* (1937, 1940, 1942), a two-volume biography of Jan Christiaan Smuts (1962, 1968), and a path breaking regional history (*Discovering Monaro*, 1972). Along the way he picked up two knighthoods and nine honorary doctorates. His varied career included the editorship of the Civil Series of the official British history of World War II, being one of ANU’s four Academic Advisors, and the driving force behind the establishment of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Beyond the ivory tower, he was the mediator in the political and constitutional crisis in the Kingdom of Buganda within the Protectorate of Uganda (in 1954), and after retirement he made another foray into the public domain, this time assuming the mantle of activist, in the bitter and futile battle to prevent a telecommunications tower being erected on Canberra’s Black Mountain (in the early 1970s). He remained academically active during his long retirement, attending his last seminar at ANU only one month before his death, aged 90.

With such solid underpinnings, one would think that Hancock’s reputation is secure – and it is not that he has been forgotten. There is a residue of increasingly aging people who knew him as a mentor or colleague; there are recent journal articles on his *oeuvre* and institutional work; and the proceedings of a major conference on Hancock at ANU in 1998 was published three years later, and edited by Anthony Low.⁽¹⁾ The

purposes of that conference were to restore Hancock to his proper prominence as much as to recognise his achievements. Although Hancock had died only nine years before the ANU conference, he was already becoming somewhat detached from the living and breathing historical profession. He is still well known and read in his native Australia, as Jim Davidson points out, and William Roger Louis proclaims Hancock as the greatest single figure in British imperial historiography (by no means all would agree), but Hancock lacks his former lustre and Davidson puts it well in saying that 'Hancock's once immense reputation is now hard for Australians to grasp: most of it was earned outside Australia, and the Commonwealth context which gave it coherence has virtually collapsed' (p. 510). Hancock played out his career on a world stage but the world only knows him in bits and pieces.

Much of it was of Hancock's unintended doing. One of the famous phrases he coined was 'attachment, justice and span'. He saw this trilogy as 'cardinal virtues' for the historian but his adherence to 'span' has not helped his cause. He was eclectic in his successive interests, resulting in an output so varied that historians in one field often have little idea of his contribution to other fields. His first book was *Ricasoli and the Risorgimento in Tuscany* (1926), and apart from later work on Machiavelli he abandoned the history of Italy. Certainly his present-centred analysis (*Australia*, 1930) has retained its original iconoclasm, but the three massive projects on which he embarked have largely fallen by the wayside. The *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs* is necessarily dated. Besides, the Commonwealth was already on the slide at the time of writing, and Hancock cheerfully admitted that he couldn't recommend the *Survey* 'to anyone of feeble health and weak determination'. *British War Economy* (1949) has never been treated than other as a reference book. *Smuts* is a forgotten biography, partly because Smuts himself has been displaced by Nelson Mandela as the national hero of South Africa. But even when the two volumes emerged in the 1960s, it was apparent that Hancock was out of tune with the times in eliding the experiences and aspiration of black South Africans: he seemed loath to engage with the moral issues embedded in South African history, whereas in many of his other writings he took overtly ethical positions on matters about which he felt strongly. That aside, could an historian ever have been more unfortunate in his choice of topics? Thus, Davidson's richly-textured biography of Hancock exemplifies the seeming paradox of the genre: biographies of historians comprise a roll call of former greats, yet they are also rescue missions to revive a flagging reputation. There is no doubt that Hancock's stocks will rise appreciably now that this biography is out and about.

Its title, *A Three-Cornered Life*, seems obscure at first sight; it alludes to Hancock's eclecticism and his being a wandering scholar. The triangle involves the spacial loves of his life, which Davidson puts metaphorically in familial terms: Australia (his 'mother country'), England (his 'wife') and Italy (his 'mistress'), although Italy was to be replaced by South Africa. It was never a quadrilateral because Hancock didn't go to war (his mother would not allow him to enlist) and because his wife Theaden's hysterectomy left them childless, to his great sorrow, and thus Hancock felt 'incomplete'. 'These were persisting vulnerabilities', writes Davidson, 'which not even prodigious achievement could overcome' (p. x).

To see Hancock as having a three-cornered life is to modify another famous phrase he coined. His autobiography (*Country and Calling*, 1954) graphically delineates the tension between an attachment to his homeland and the need to pursue advancement overseas. Thus, a second theme pursued in *A Three-Cornered Life* is that of expatriatism. The autobiography would have been better titled *Country or Calling*, given the ambivalences of Hancock's expatriatism. When he returned as professor at the University of Adelaide in 1926 but he found both the university and the city inimical to a life of the mind. He complained that no major research could be accomplished in Adelaide but that is where *Australia*, his most enduring book, was written. He departed for Birmingham eight years later, telling his departmental assistant that he was going 'to where history's worth doing and the company's worth keeping'. Back in England the pull of 'calling' was stronger than the beckoning of 'country', and he was not prepared to return as professor to his *alma mater*, despite Melbourne being congenial, because this would have taken him away from the *Survey*. It complicated matters that Theaden wanted to be in England when they were in Australia, and in Australia when they were in England. *Country and calling* finally came together in 1957 – three years after the publication of the autobiography – when Hancock was inveigled back to Australia as Professor of History

and Director of the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU. Almost two decades later, in his sequel book of autobiographical studies (*Professing History*, 1976), Hancock still found himself ‘in love with two soils’.

The metaphor is apt, and it introduces a third theme – the landscape – that interweaves *A Three-Cornered Life*. Hancock was forever thinking about the environment and applying that thought to different circumstances. There is a straight environmental line from Tuscany to Monaro. Working on his first book, he idealised the agricultural landscape of hillside terraces and the land use system generally. As well, he donned a stout pair of boots, tramped the countryside and interviewed eyewitnesses. His early Tuscan foray crystallised a mindset that had enduring implications. Not least, Smuts’s ‘lasting attachment to the African landscape’ (p. 343) provided one of several points of contact between biographer and subject. When Hancock took up his position at ANU in 1957 he established the interdisciplinary ‘Wool Seminar’, which ran for two years. The seminar eased Hancock back into Australian history and ultimately *Discovering Monaro*, which he researched with assurance and gusto. (Let it be said in passing that the dust jacket portrait exactly captures the light and colours of the countryside around Canberra.)

A life so long, with experiences so numerous, and an *oeuvre* so varied has entailed massive research spread across 36 archival repositories in four different countries, not to mention papers in private possession and a visit to the Ricasoli estate in Tuscany. As well, Davidson knew Hancock, off and on, for over 20 years (pp. ix–x) and he has a background in Australian and South African history. Quite independent of provenance is Davidson’s desire to tell his own story. He has avoided using Hancock’s autobiographical writings wherever possible, preferring to rely on his own archival research. He is, of course, conversant with previous writings on Hancock but does not explicitly engage with them, and neither does he berate historians who have perpetrated factual errors – myself included. Least of all does he bother with a story, which I find hard to credit, that Peter Ryan put into print. Ryan at the time was publisher at Melbourne University Press and he happened to be seated beside Hancock at a ‘grand dinner’ at University House, Canberra. Ryan asked a ‘friendly question’ about Alf Conlon, who had been involved with the establishment of ANU, to which Hancock ‘almost spat in my ear: “Alf Conlon was a c***”!’ (2)

As well dealing with Hancock’s published output, Davidson deals with Hancock the man and Hancock institution-builder. One side to Hancock was wholly admirable. He was a great encourager and facilitator, and the kindly and ‘puckish’ side to Hancock is captured to perfection on front cover photograph of Anthony Low’s conference proceedings. At one point in Adelaide he increased his already-heavy teaching load in order that the departmental assistant might have two-years leave in London to work on his thesis (p. 85). Some 30 years later at ANU he managed to kick-start his departmental colleague Laurie Fitzhardinge’s commissioned biography of Billy Hughes (a former Australian prime minister) into life. Fitzhardinge was a ditherer and a chatterbox, and Hancock’s stratagem was that they meet every Friday morning and each would read out what he had written the week before (p. 415). He cared about the profession and was able to bring out the best work in people under his charge. It follows that ‘he would have loathed the corporate university of today’ (p. 509).

There was a less attractive side to Hancock, who had more than a usual quota of conflicting qualities. He was inclined to throw his weight around; had a keen sense of his own importance; was strongly hierarchical (as fitted the times); sometimes behaved badly at seminars in the face of criticism; and occasionally pursued his objectives with an unpleasant determination. Davidson provides plenty of examples, not least in his account of Hancock’s time as Academic Advisor at ANU in the late 1940s and early 1950s when he so badly misread people and circumstances (in contrast to his work in Buganda a few years later). In part, his maladroitness was the product of an old-fashioned liberalism suffused with an Anglican ethic – the very values that served him well in other contexts. He believed that rational discussion would provide proper outcomes but was at a loss when confronted with sabotage. The establishment of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* almost floundered on the rock of Malcolm Ellis’s intransigence. Hancock was no more able than the next man to handle unrestrained dissent but the fact remains that his basic values impelled him to allow an untenable situation to go from bad to worse; and this happened not once but twice at ANU.

The second episode concerned Lord Lindsay of Birker (Michael Lindsay), who had been passed over for the chair in International Relations within ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies. The received wisdom, which Davidson repeats, is that the unstable Michael Lindsay aspired to a chair for which he had no claim. At the time of Hancock's arrival at ANU, Martin Wight of LSE had been offered the chair and Lindsay was up in arms, thus providing further evidence of his unfitness to professorial advancement. Hancock, the prevailing account goes, encouraged Lindsay to express his concerns to Wight, and he did so in terms that persuaded Wight to stay at LSE. Lindsay was indeed impossible but James Cotton has recently demonstrated that ANU bears much of the responsibility. Quite apart from being acting head of department for several years and establishing International Relations at ANU both in disciplinary and departmental terms, he had been repeatedly misled by the university about his own prospects. More to the point, *he* was better qualified and better published than Wight, not the other way around. And it turns out that Hancock was quietly conducting a correspondence with Wight, advising him what to say to Lindsay. It was duplicitous and Lindsay had cause to dub Hancock 'Sir Fox'.⁽³⁾

An element of 'Sir Fox' is also evident in Hancock's interference in the running of the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS) from his seat as Director of the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH). The extent of these interventions are not always apparent in *A Three-Cornered Life*, and they went beyond providing the academic leadership expected of him. It is true that Hancock insisted, as a condition of his own appointment, that he be consulted on the appointment of the new anthropology professor in RSPacS, given the 'close interweaving' of the two Research Schools.⁽⁴⁾ Soon after arriving he terminated the Joint Faculty Board and the two Schools went their separate ways. That did not stop Hancock from continuing to involve himself in the anthropology appointment, a messy and sorry affair to which he contributed. As the successful applicant remarked, '... Hancock's propensity for acting a broker in the professorial market-place remained undiminished'.⁽⁵⁾ He could not keep his interfering fingers off such things, even when they did not directly concern him. The unsuccessful internal candidate complained with brutal, if embittered accuracy, saying that Hancock's 'form becomes increasingly clear: much protestation that he does not want power and responsibility, together with a slow acquisition of both. I should guess that when the time comes he will with the utmost reluctance allow himself to be persuaded that it is his duty to look after [RSPacS] as well as [RSSH]. Meanwhile, with much pretty play on the disabilities of age ('after all, I'm going on for sixty') and on the joys of other times ('there was no snobbery at All Souls') and of things foregone ('I have been too long away to understand the modern Australia') he proceeds to dominate'.⁽⁶⁾

The chapter on Hancock's first marriage ('Theaden: a portrait of a marriage') departs from the book's chronological organisation. Marriage is not a road that biographers or historians normally venture far down, a notable exception being the most recent biography of another Australian historian, Manning Clark.⁽⁷⁾ Hancock was nowhere the same league as E. H. Carr, with three failed marriages, but his marriage to Theaden was a prolonged and stormy middle passage. Her ill health and depressions were only part of the problem. In a moment of anger that Hancock had not helped him secure a job, Hancock's former Adelaide student Russel Ward went so far as to say, 'I wish he falls dead, which is better than being married to an insane wife as I understand he is'.⁽⁸⁾ That is a travesty. Suffice it to say that 'Theaden: a portrait of a marriage' is the most moving chapter I have read in any biography of an historian.

To sum up, the three cardinal virtues of 'attachment, justice and span' are on full display in this magnificent biography. W. K. Hancock deserved such a biography and Jim Davidson has delivered it.⁽⁹⁾

Notes

1. *Keith Hancock: The Legacies of an Historian*, ed. D. A. Low (Melbourne, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Ryan, *Brief Lives* (Sydney, 2004), p. 55.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James Cotton, 'International relations in Australia: Michael Lindsay, Martin Wight and the first department at the Australian National University', Working Paper 2010/2, Department of International Relations, Australian National University, 2010. <http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/ir/pubs/work_papers/10-2.pdf

- [2]> [accessed 17 December 2010].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hancock to Melville, 24 February 1956, Hancock Papers, Australian National University Archives, Series 19, Folder 18.[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. John Barnes, *Humping my Drum: A Memoir* (Self-published, 2008), p. 269.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. W. E. H. Stanner to Raymond Firth, 15 October 1958, FIRTH8/2/13, Firth Archive, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics and Political Science.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: A Life* (Sydney, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Quoted in Fay Anderson, *An Historian's Life: Max Crawford and the Politics of Academic Freedom* (Melbourne, 2005), p. 303.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Jim Davidson has written a reflection on writing biography: 'Bouncing on the trampoline of fact: biography and the historical imagination', *Australian Book Review*, 323 (July-August 2010), pp. 42–5.
[Back to \(9\)](#)

The author is grateful for this review and does not wish to comment further.

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