Bernard O'Dowd and the ‘Problem’ of Race

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'Racism is the most important single component of Australian nationalism.' 1

So wrote Humphrey McQueen in 1970: and historians have largely accepted his contention that Australian nationalism and racism were inseparable bedfellows in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The aim of this paper is to explore the racial ideas of one radical nationalist intellectual of this period, Bernard O’Dowd (1866-1953), who seems to be an exception to the McQueen thesis. Its object, however, is not merely to provide a sketch of the ideas of an eccentric man. Instead, I am pursuing a method advocated by the cultural historian Robert Darnton of attempting to understand the past by exploring it at the points ‘where it seems to be most opaque’:

... other people are other. They do not think the way we do. And if we want to understand their way of thinking, we should set out with the idea of capturing otherness ... We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock ... When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. 2

The appositeness of this ethnographic method to an examination of a fin-de-siècle opponent of racial exclusion seems self-evident. When one encounters a critic of racial prejudice in an era of rampant bigotry, among the most alluring of enticements that face the historian is the temptation to ‘understand’ the past by accommodating the knowledge of ‘other’ people to our own. The result of this ‘false sense of familiarity’ in studies of Australian racial ideas is that turn-of-the-century critics of White Australia (such as O’Dowd) become forerunners of an enlightened multiculturalism, irrespective of the philosophical foundations of their notions. We neutralise their otherness. This perspective might be useful for those who believe that the main purpose of the past is to furnish fuel for the fire of modern political controversies; but it is hardly calculated to the unravelling of ‘an alien system of meaning’. If we are to approach a solution to this latter problem, we need to avoid this powerful sense of familiarity in studies of Australian racial ideas is that turn-of-the-century critics of White Australia (such as O’Dowd) become forerunners of an enlightened multiculturalism, irrespective of the philosophical foundations of their notions. We neutralise their otherness. This perspective might be useful for those who believe that the main purpose of the past is to furnish fuel for the fire of modern political controversies; but it is hardly calculated to the unravelling of ‘an alien system of meaning’. If we are to approach a solution to this latter problem, we need to avoid this powerful sense of familiarity.

A study of Bernard O’Dowd’s ideas might thus cast light on tensions in Australian attitudes to race, and doubt on interpretations of turn-of-the-century radicalism and nationalism which treat racism as a dominant ideology that can help to explain everything from union militancy and anti-conscription to militarism and anti-imperialism. We need to be more attentive to the fissures, tensions and ambiguities in ethnic and racial ideas, so that the concept of ‘racism’, to the extent that it is useful at all, becomes a launching pad for historical understanding rather than its terminus. Such a method might also cast light on contemporary debates about race, racism and national identity.

It would, of course, be unwise to rest too great a weight of argument on a study of a single individual, particularly on such a notorious gadfly as O’Dowd. Yet it is significant that O’Dowd has often been identified as a representative of a radical nationalist tradition in Australian history assumed to be racist in character,3 and, at least in certain circles, O’Dowd did exercise some cultural authority in the years between the 1890s and the 1950s. More generally, historians have recognised O’Dowd as having grappled with many of the problems that exercised Australian liberal and radical intellectuals in the period of transition from colonialism to nationhood and modernity.4 And, for all of the supposed agreement about the White Australia Policy, the question of race was on the agenda in this period. This exploration of the ethnic and racial ideas of Bernard O’Dowd will focus on his attitudes to Asia, and to the Australian Aborigines.

Attitudes to Asia

O’Dowd’s opposition to the White Australia Policy has not escaped historians’ notice, but most of their attention has focussed on his role in the debate on ‘Brotherhood’ that occurred in the pages of the Socialist, the organ Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), in the first decade of the twentieth century.5 O’Dowd had, in fact, been criticising racial bigotry for at least ten years by the time this debate was initiated in 1907 by Amelia Lambrick (writing under the name ‘Hypatia’), who was a somewhat confused and inconsistent critic of racial prejudice. Lambrick had previously lectured for the Theosophical Society, and it is tempting to surmise that O’Dowd’s own involvement in the activities of spiritualists, secularists and theosophists had been a formative influence on his racial attitudes, since members of these groups frequently held unconventionical views on such questions. For example, the autocratic president of the Australasian Secular Association in the 1880s, Joseph Symes, was a critic of anti-Chinese agitation.6 While there is no evidence that O’Dowd had unconventional attitudes on racial questions at this time, the possibility cannot be ruled out that Symes’s internationalism influenced him to some extent.

The first clear evidence of a shift in O’Dowd’s attitudes to race, however, is from the 1890s: earlier, his views seem to have been rather conventional. In a letter to fellow-poet Marie Pitt in 1907, O’Dowd admitted that he had been repelled by the Chinese as a schoolboy,7 and there is evidence that in the 1880s he was no critic of racial stereotyping. In an unpublished sketch written at this time (‘The Tutor’), we gain an insight into O’Dowd’s racial ideas as a young man of about eighteen. The setting is a pastoral station, where there lives ‘a mischievous, playful, but withal, kind-hearted boy fond of practical jokes and the favourite of everyone on the station with the exception of the Chinaman Too Gee’. George’s father, Mr. Wyatt, ‘in his heart believed in the equality of man and as far as he consistently could, acted up to that belief’. Consequently, he ‘had taught his son to respect all’, encouraging him to mix with the sons of the poor farmers in the district; and, ‘being of a generous disposition’, George experiences no difficulty in forming such friendships. It soon becomes clear, however, that young George’s kind-heartedness and generosity does not extend to non-whites.

O’Dowd indulges in the most blatant racial stereotyping when he comes to describe Too Gee:
Too Gee was engaged at the station doing whatever was necessary about the house... He worked very well but was not liked on account of his selfishness & besides he had a great and lasting antipathy to little boys.

He lived by himself in a hut a little way from the house, 'and unlike the other station hands he did not have his meals in the kitchen but cooked his own.' There were continual clashes between George and Too Gee. George frequently called him 'monkey', which was 'the name with which John Chinaman is dubbed by the majority of Australian youths, in whom, by-the-by there seems to be a natural-born hatred to Chinamen'. The Chinaman reported George's taunts George would gain his revenge in some practical joke. It comes as no surprise at this point to learn that Too Gee is a superstitious man, who was especially afraid of a grandfather 'who had died many years before, but whose funeral offerings had been omitted for several months on one occasion'. On one occasion, George and his friend made a 'ghost' with which to terrify the Chinaman; on another, they locked him in his house with his pig, which Too Gee believed would bring him bad luck.9

There is nothing in this story to suggest that O'Dowd had any qualms about popular images of Chinese among white Australians. Indeed, another fragment of writing on the Chinese from the same period makes a similar point:

"Many of them...gain a livelihood by haunting the neighbourhood of successful miners and when the opportunity presents itself they scrape the crevices of the puddling machines & carrying off their plunder in a bag, wash it when they[get]to a safe distance. For they are expert thieves, as indeed they ought to be if it be true that the refuse of the Canton & Shanghai gaols are packed on board ship to be transported from their own Celestial land to places where they will never be likely to disturb the native peace again. It is said that they will never cheat each other, considering it a great dishonour, but by no means so if they cheat Europeans. This is not strictly true, although it may be generally so, for I know of many instances in which Chinamen have made complete dupes of several of their countrymen.10"

In this passage, we meet a young democrat and radical, born and bred in the Ballarat district: there is nothing unexpected or unconventional about his prejudices once set in this context. What is remarkable is the later trend of O'Dowd's thought on racial questions. From the 1890s, O'Dowd was perhaps the most outspoken critic of racism in the labour movement and Australian society. For example, in his writings on the Federal Bill of 1898, O'Dowd raised an objection that did not figure prominently in the labour movement's criticisms of the proposed constitution: its endorsement of racial discrimination. He condemned 'the undemocratic branding of "inferior" races... Pure democracy is colour-blind'. 'I hate the notion of castes in a community', he added.11 A few months after federation had been achieved, in a remarkable editorial in the radical weekly the Tocsin, O'Dowd recognised the right of Australians to exclude for their shores anyone who threatened their standard of living. He could not, however, find any justification for distinguishing in this regard between whites and 'coloured races':

"I know that the coloured races are called inferior races, but I must admit that I cannot see evidences of their inferiority which do not equally brand the white races of Europe and America as inferior. The notion of inferiority appears to me to be a myth sprung originally from European ignorance and nourished now by a foolish self-conceit.12"

While O'Dowd believed that Westerners had been more successful in overthrowing tyranny than the people of the East, this was not evidence of white superiority but rather 'of the superior effectiveness of Eastern methods of tyranny over Western' (Not even O'Dowd could disregard the image of Oriental despotism!). Legislation that discriminated on the basis of race - and O'Dowd nominated several examples - was a danger to democracy because it recognised the principle of inequality: 'we must take our fellow man in Africa, in Asia and in Europe by the hand as a man and a brother (nay if she is willing as a brother-in-law). The true enemies of white workers', declared O'Dowd, 'are bosses, not coloured workers, as the true enemies of the coloured workers are bosses, not white workers.'13

O'Dowd resurrected these ideas during the VSP's 'Brotherhood' debate in 1907. Graeme Osborne and Verity Burgmann have discussed these debates in some detail:14 my concern here is specifically with O'Dowd's contribution, and its place in his intellectual development. The exclusion of people from Australia on account of the colour of their skins and 'the application of disabilities' to non-whites in Australia was 'high treason against that democracy which, ignoring race and colour equally with sex, birth and caste, builds on manhood alone'. (O'Dowd did not explain why a democracy that ignored sex should be built on manhood!) He provided a clue about his own change of mind on this whole subject since the 1880s: 'I owe too much to the religion, the philosophy, and the literature of the Eastern countries to be able to summarily degrade their intellectual classes below those of European countries.'15

In the following week, the Socialist published a poem O'Dowd had written on the subject some time before with the title 'Democratisate the World!':

"Shall we who bade the baron go,
The serf become a man
Acknowledge baron races? No!
Such heresy we ban."

In a subsequent article, O'Dowd touched on the most sensitive subject of all - miscegenation - a matter he had only alluded to in passing in 1901:

"The favourite argument used by the White Australian debater is, "Would you like to have a Chinaman for a brother-in-law or son-in-law"? The answer is, "Some Chinamen would probably be preferable to many white men... and many white men would be preferable to some Chinamen... in any case, it is not a question of our preferences, but of our sisters' or daughters' preferences".16"

This sensible comment prompted predictable responses from correspondents such as W.J. Baxter and Marie Pitt, who agreed on the undesirability of miscegenation and woman's instinct for racial purity.17 O'Dowd had other opinions, and went so far as to speculate that 'prolonged in-breeding of the white race' might account for 'its rapid nervous degeneration in recent years'. 'Asia', he thought, was 'superior to Europe and Australia in ethics and the religious sense, but inferior in economic ideals' It was the duty of Australians to teach them such ideas as a step towards the democratisation of the world.18

**Theosophy, Race and the Aborigines**

O'Dowd continued courageously to profess such ideas in the years before the Great War. In a 1912 review of Louis Esson's one-act play 'The Sacred Place', he suggested 'that Socialists might do worse than get in touch with the finer types of Asiatic sojourners in Australia... with a view both to getting more of them into our movement, and to ultimate correspondence and friendly co-operation with advanced bodies of political and economic thinkers in their countries'.19 It is at this point that O'Dowd seems most clearly to be a
prophet of Australian social-democratic modernity, but there is a
danger in regarding him in this light. This danger is perhaps best
exposed by turning to O'Dowd's attitudes to the Aborigines.

O'Dowd was concerned, perhaps above all else, with the creation
of an antipodean national culture that would draw on the best that
European and Asian civilisations had to offer, but also rest on a
powerful sense of place and a mature and distinctive Australian
historical consciousness. For O'Dowd, one way in which this
romantic national consciousness—an 'indigenous' sense of the past
—would be created among a mainly white population was by
connecting the history of the Australian continent and the Aboriginal
people to the history of humanity. He saw in Aboriginal cultural
practices, myths and legends circumstantial evidence of a secret
history of a lost white civilisation of central Australia, a vision
connected to the 'Lemurian' speculation that historians have seen as
characteristic of the 1890s in Australia (and elsewhere).

Lemuria was the name which P.L. Sclater, a zoologist, gave to a
lost continent that had once supposedly extended from south-east
Asia nearly to Africa. As the Mosaic chronology became widely
discredited in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was
considerable room for speculation about lost continents and
'primitive' peoples.20 In this connection, O'Dowd might have been
influenced by the ideas of H.P. Blavatsky, one of the founders of
theosophy: Bernard had been associated with the Society, sometimes
as a member, since the 1890s and read many of its publications.
Blavatsky believed that Australia had once been 'an inland region
on the Mother Continent', which had come into being at the time of
the third root-race. This view gave Australia 'a profound importance'
in world history.21 (No wonder it appealed to a cultural nationalist
such as O'Dowd!) According to Blavatsky, the Lemurians were one
of the five root-races that had thus far featured in world history; and
the Australian Aborigines—or at least some of them—were descended
from the Lemurians:

The Secret Doctrine teaches that the specific unity of mankind is not
without exceptions even now. For there are...descendants of these
half-animal tribes or races, both of remote Lemurian and Lemuro-
Atlantean origin. The world knows them as Tasmanians (now extinct)
and Australian.

This perspective could offer powerful support for colonisation
and dispossession. The Australian descendants of the Lemurians,
after all, belonged to 'a very low sub-race, begotten originally of
animals, of monsters, whose very fossils are now resting miles under
the sea floors'. They had existed for thousands of years 'in an
environment strongly subjected to the law of retardation', and so
had become 'degraded men'. The Aborigines, she claimed, were
'the descendants of those, who, instead of vivifying the spark dropped
into them by the "Flames", extinguished it by long generations of
bestiality'. They were thus not merely a doomed race; Blavatsky
also denied the Aborigines a full measure of humanity, attributing to
them a spurious hybrid quality defenceless for extinction caused by
some great divine tide, for the abuse of its holy trust'.22 O'Dowd was
able to account for the presence of the Aborigines, except as some
dross subsequently thrown up by a strange continent:

The wretched horde whom Europe's host
In this strange land found
Are but the flotsam of our coast
Mere exudations from the ground.23

By the late 1890s, probably as a consequence of his reading of
the report of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia
and the early work of Baldwin Spencer and F.H. Gillen, he had modified
his attitude and was particularly impressed with Aboriginal marriage
customs.24 Yet something rather stronger than mere traces of his
earlier views remained. On the contrary, the older attitude is refracted
by Lemurian discourse, as when O'Dowd asked whether 'our dirty
black brother' is 'the sole relic of an Atlantean civilisation, which,
weighed in the balance and found wanting, had paid the price of
extinction, by some great divine tide, for the abuse of its holy trust?'.
O'Dowd places Aboriginality at the disposal of the British colonial
culture: here was 'a piece of the past on which to build epic and
comic stories'.

Literary critics and cultural historians have often drawn
attention to O'Dowd's vision of Australia as 'Delos of a
coming Sun-God's race' in his most famous sonnet,
'Australia', without considering the possibility of a theosophical inspiration for the idea. It has instead been located within colonial discourses of the emerging national type and the coming nation, which is reasonable so far as it goes, but somewhat imprecise. At the very least, O'Dowd's theosophical connections must be considered to form a part of the intellectual background for the poem. In an article written for the magazine *Theosophy in Australia* in 1912, O'Dowd declared that

> [the] differences of men disappear with their differing environments, and with brotherhood felt as a brotherhood in fact, in all the rich elements of the human varieties can and should and shall mingle together in one great human stream, bearing with it in the fullness of time the noblest and most complete race, physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual that has ever lived on this planet.  

Here was an argument for racial admixture, although it was a judicious racial mixture that O'Dowd had in mind. His theosophy and evolutionary perspective on racial development permitted him to distinguish between different races. As he told Nettie Palmer in 1915, he did not 'happen to like the Jap soul much' but liked 'the Chinese very much' and went as far as to advocate 'a judicious mixture' with both the Chinese and the Afghans. There is, however, other evidence in O'Dowd's writings that he was influenced by Blavatsky's ideas. In his long poem, *The Bush*, there are references to the doctrine of the Great Year, which O'Dowd derived from his reading of Plutarch, and which he recognised as similar to Blavatsky's root-race theory, with its vision of world history as the rise, decline and fall of great races and civilisations. In the same article referred to above, he discussed the transitory nature of human glory and the inevitability of decay ... the ... contemporaneous existence of races in the first flush of their springtime bloom, races in the full vigour of their culminating accomplishments, races in the peace of decline, and races in the awful winter of death waiting the fateful moment when their new birth-hour, the springtime of their next Great Year, will be sounded....

There can be little doubt where he placed the Australian Aborigines in this scheme of things. Yet, for O'Dowd, the cosmic law of love transcended the rise and fall of civilisations. It proclaimed human brotherhood, the highest truth that all races were really one, and adapted in an antipodean colonial context, by both the pro-White Aborigines; and in Blavatsky's scheme, Aborigines and white Australians belonged to different root-races.  

In general, the complexity of O'Dowd's racial views should act as a warning to historians who wish to ransack the past for examples of 'racism'. What this paper has shown is that his attitudes to race were marked by complexity and ambivalence. The categories 'racist' and 'anti-racist', 'enlightened' and 'unenlightened', can have little place in such an historical account. Indeed, we should
no more expect to identify stable racial or ethnic identities in such writings than we would expect to find fixed meanings of class or gender in the languages used by radical intellectuals. The result of such a recognition will be a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which intellectuals involved in Australian public debate have grappled with problems raised by the relationship of race and ethnicity to their project of creating a common national culture and historical consciousness in a young settler society.

Endnotes


7 *Liberator*, 25 March 1888.

8 O'Dowd to Pitt, 22 October 1907, Pitt Papers, in J.K. Moir *Collection*, Box 22A/1(6), State Library of Victoria (VSL).

9 Bernard O'Dowd, 'The Tutor', unpublished manuscript, n.d. [c.1885], O'Dowd Papers, Box 2/6, VSL.

10 Bernard O'Dowd, loose fragment, n.d., O'Dowd Papers, Box 2/6, VSL.

11 *Tocsin*, 26 May 1898; 2 June 1898.

12 *Tocsin*, 25 April 1901.

13 See endnote 6.

14 *Socialist*, 25 May 1907.

15 *Socialist*, 1 June 1907.

16 *Socialist*, 25 May 1907.

17 *Socialist*, 1, 15 June 1907.

18 *Socialist*, 8 June 1907; 20 July 1908.

19 *Socialist*, 12 January 1912.


24 *Advance Australia*, 1 June 1897.


26 Bernard O'Dowd, 'The Tutor'.

27 Bernard O'Dowd, 'A Synod of Australia's Olympus, Scene – The summit of Chamber's Pillar; Time – Sunset. Midsummer; Enter the Muse of Australia', loose sheet, n.d., in exercise book, O'Dowd Papers Box 2/7, VSL.

28 *Tocsin*, 7 September 1899.

29 *Advance Australia*, 1 June 1897.


31 *Theosophy in Australia*, 1 October 1912, p.178.

32 O'Dowd to Palmer, 10 January 1915, Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS 1174/1/1371.

33 *Theosophy in Australia*, 2 September, 153-6; 1 October 1912, pp.175-9.


35 *Theosophy in Australia*, 1 October 1912, pp.175-9.
