BOOK REVIEWS

AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL ELITES: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne, by John Docker, Angus and Robertson, 1974 (165 pages, bibliography, notes, index).

-- TIM ROWSE

One of the great weaknesses of Australian political life is the miserable failure of marxist analysis to make a positive impact on most of our secular intellectuals. By intellectuals I mean that more or less coherent and continuous group of people who write for our quarterlies, churn out weekly columns in our newspapers, present Australian society to us in books and essays, and occasionally comment on the affairs of the nation and/or the ‘human condition’, for television or radio. Sometimes their books are set for schools (such as Donald Horne’s Lucky Country). They are not always household names but they are immensely influential since their function is to produce the ideas with which most Australians know their society and its place in the world. Naturally I’m using ‘know’ with my fingers crossed: the knowledge presented in these different media is ideological, with its characteristic presumptions of pluralism, consensus, affluence and its comfortable and indulgent fatalism about human nature.

‘Class’ is a word rarely used by these commentators; when it occurs it is used descriptively as a socio-economic category or to explain some ‘breakdown’ of industrial relations. In their literary and artistic criticism the mainstream writers are rarely concerned with art as a reinforcer of the ideologies of capitalism. The universities, with a few ‘ratbag’ exceptions, treat marxism as an ideologically, with its characteristic presumptions of pluralism, consensus, affluence and its comfortable and indulgent fatalism about human nature.

A genuine challenge to Australian capitalism will require that analysis of all social activities be made from the point of view of the working class. There needs to be a struggle against ideology itself contesting the orthodoxies which clutter our media and reinforce class domination. My impression of ‘the Left’ in Australia is that it has often failed to distance itself from non-marxist orthodoxies about Australian social life. Most writers are still too comfortable with images of Australia which posture as unorthodox and Leftish, but contain little to question the class power of the bourgeoisie. There are marxist parties, unions and student groups but there is not an effective marxist analysis of our indigenous cultural streams coming from any of them. There have been some faint stirrings in this direction from writers in Arena (Melbourne), in the 1960s, echoed in Richard Gordon’s anthology The Australian New Left (1970), but nothing has come from this quarter since.

Nothing, that is, except John Docker’s book, which in some respects reflects its association with Arena, where some of its material was first published. In this volume, Docker has written about some of the most important producers of bourgeois ideology in Australia this century, though he never conceives them in these terms. His concern is, rather, to argue that Australian culture is not a monolithic tradition, but contains at least two distinct traditions of assumptions about society, politics, education and creativity. Docker locates these traditions geographically; one is characteristic of Melbourne, the other of Sydney.

The Sydney tradition is one of ‘elite ‘pluralism’: society is composed of many groups and subcultures of which the artistic/intellectual/bohemian one is more free, uncompromised, creative, sexually honest. The life-style of the intellectuals is self-consciously antagonistic to the rest of society which is wowserish, dull, utilitarian, conformist, materialistic, etc. Their political practice is laissez-faire and anarchist. This tradition has both a literary (Brennan, Slessor, Lindsay, A.D. Hope, Patrick White) and a philosophical component (John Anderson and the Freethought/Libertarian tradition). Basic assumptions about society and nature are shared by the poets and the philosophers.

The Melbourne tradition is more historically conscious than the Platonic Sydneyites, more engaged with a distinctive Australian tradition which they formulated and wanted to see flourish. “The Melbourne intellectual will characteristically think that an Australian, nationalistic derived, social democratic ethos and egalitarian ethic are compatible with what are seen as central values of European civilisation. Melbourne intellectuals feel at the centre of their society, both because they are spokesmen for, or social activists on behalf of, the social democratic spirit of Australia’s past, and because they are bringing to Australia European standards of sophistication and relevance.” (p. IX). Their political practice is more activist, favoring the ALP, though a considerable number were CPA members
before 1956 (some of them are now associated with Overland). This tradition is analysed by Docker in terms of the work of Vance and Nettie Palmer, and C.B. Christesen's Meanjin. It is a more self-conscious tradition than the Sydney literary one, from Brennan to White. The Sydney poets and novelists are not conceived as a tradition in the same sense as the Andersonians and the Meanjin intellectuals. The Sydney literary tradition is elucidated by Docker through a detailed literary exegesis which is perceptive, even ingeniously so, but which is not historical. Chapter Four is called "Patrick White’s Australian Literary Context", but it is precisely not about any ‘context’. The critical reception of White and the illustrative use made of him by some social commentators would have been good material for this chapter. Instead we get an extended description of the thematic imagery of The Vivisector and Riders in the Chariot. This literary-critical framework encompassing chapters 1 - 5 excludes the social impact of these poems and novels from its focus, treating these works as art-objects whose cultural significance is internal; this is an aesthetic rather than historical approach, despite the chronological ordering of the discussion.

The second half of the book is about literary critics and social commentators of both traditions; it is more readable and it necessarily begins to confront questions of historical interpretation. In these chapters, Docker deals with Meanjin, Vance and Nettie Palmer, the difference between Meanjin and Southerly (Sydney’s major literary journal), and “John Anderson and the Sydney Free Thought Tradition”, a fascinating account of the strange avenues into which intellectual radicalism can turn. The interest in these chapters is more due to the material itself than to Docker’s approach, however. He is concerned with elucidating the different accounts of society and the different cultural projects of each tradition. It is still an internal approach. Docker’s treatment of the historical context of his intellectuals (mainly 1940 to the present, apart from a discussion of the Palmers between the wars) is frustratingly cavalier. For instance in his Introduction we can read these two sentences, two pages apart:

Although spread over a number of decades, these Sydney writers share a continuous historical situation. (x)

and

The thinking in both of the Sydney traditions represents intellectual choices in terms of ‘international’ movements and doctrines, literary philosophical and political, but these intellectual choices emerge at the same time as a response to specific Sydney historical situations. (xii)

I think the first sentence is meant to paraphrase the view of the intellectuals themselves, while the second is Docker’s own summary comment, later fleshed out a little. (i.e. in his description of the Sydney hostility to Labor’s post-war planning proposals.)

But importantly, the first sentence requires my gloss, for Docker does little to place his intellectuals historically. This should not surprise us, since the book’s intention never really involves anything but a close reading of selected texts and a differentiation of their themes into two categories or ‘traditions’. And I think he has clearly established the presence of two thematic streams, two self-images of literary, artistic or scholarly activity. My argument against the book is that this question of cultural homogeneity and Docker’s answer of duality or plurality evades the most important questions about Australian intellectuals, their function as producers of ideology in a class society.

We can locate Docker as a Sydney pluralist by referring to the three most critical themes in the book: (1) the critique of patriarchy (in the comments on Lindsay’s and Hope’s sexist image of women, and in the acquiescence of Nettie Palmer and Miles Franklin to a male-centred account of the tradition); (2) the attack on the Meanjin intellectuals’ aspiration to reform the culture through their critical and literary efforts; and (3) “the degeneration of free-thought” (p. 153). The third argument implies some commitment to the original value of Anderson’s pluralist scepticism; the second and the first show the pluralist critique in action. Docker writes of Meanjin:

To see Australian society as it wanted, Meanjin intellectuals had to deny in Australian history evidence and expressions which did not fit into a corporate tradition. They could not see that historically the values they admired were not incompatible with acquisitive individualism and a liberal hegemony, and that in the name of these values women and other ‘races’ and cultures were excluded. (p. 109).

Tepid pluralism, locating heterogeneity in our ‘tradition’, is the only critical standpoint adopted by the author, though there is a kind of unspoken ironical distance between Docker and all his material. But this is so in any
account of someone's 'assumptions'; and it is part of the convention of historical narrative that previous lived experience is compressed and reformulated, and held at a distance - a rhetorical, rather than theoretical distance in this case. Lastly, the first five chapters of the book are just the kind of litcrit exegesis that Southerly critics are characterised by, in that it does not look outwards to the conditions which nurtured this common creative project.

But what would a marxist approach to this material look like? The marxist historiography of culture is not in very good shape at the moment, but it seems elementary to start by looking at these writers as producers of knowledge. Although Althusser has recently asserted that ideological practice has its own historical path, which does not necessarily reflect contemporary economic and political developments, this "autonomy" must not become a slippery-dip back into the history of ideas. For the history of ideological practice to be properly constituted, we must take seriously the notion that ideology is produced and involves a means of production. It is the critical task of historians like Docker to discern the basic intellectual apparatus with which Australian intellectuals have produced their picture of Australian society.

To give Docker his due, the chapters on the Sydney literary tradition do elucidate common assumptions about nature and society. However, the relationship between literature (i.e. that which is commonly called literature) and popular social thought is that the former provides "social" insights according to categories provided by the latter. Thus, the chapter on Patrick White could have discussed the way his novels have been used to uphold certain images of Australian political culture such as "suburbia". The historical significance of White is not purely internal to his novels, as Docker implies by his focus, but consists just as much in the prevailing readings of his work. As marxists we need to approach these writers as the disseminators of a knowledge which assists people to accept more or less willingly the goodness and rationality of the capitalist social relations in which they find themselves. All sorts of ideas can play this role, which is one reason why capitalist societies can be culturally heterogeneous. Religious fatalism, cynical pragmatism, sexist or anti-working class humor, bourgeois economics, etc., all help to rationalise to individuals their behaviour in a capitalist society. The ideas dealt with in Docker's book mostly tend to be about the way we conceive Australian society and history, "character", and art. Both traditions mystify and frustrate by their pervasiveness a marxist comprehension of Australian society.

By reading these writers we do not come to a clear understanding of the process of class struggle in Australian society, the role of the ALP and the media, the activities of Australian imperialism. Some writers are explicitly conservative, but more dangerous are those who vividly articulate certain anti-capitalist sentiments. Their arguments are usually rooted in an Enlightenment Humanism, a confident assertion of rational and humane values, an ethical protest against a diffuse family of modern juggernauts: technology, the USA, the power elite, greed. Characteristically this critique ignores or dismisses the presence of material forces which could challenge and disintegrate the source of their anxiety.

However, it would not be entirely fair to lump Vance Palmer with Norman Lindsay, nor Ian Turner with Peter Coleman. Palmer and Turner have been active partisans of a kind of socialism in their different ways, and the Melbourne tradition, as formulated by Docker, must have nourished the huge Moratorium movement in that city. Meanjin has a good record as an opponent of Australian McCarthyism when such opposition required personal courage. An adequate marxist account of Australian intellectuals must recognise the limited virtue of the Melbourne social-democratic affiliation and the sturdy anarchism which still survives in Sydney. The strength and weakness of Australia's "Left-Intelligentsia" are largely derived from these two currents. The weakness of both is their denigration of marxism and their subsequent disdain for revolutionary politics and particularly revolutionary parties. Some intellectuals, like Ian Turner and Steven Murray-Smith have had unfortunate experiences of the CPA in the mid-fifties, when it was so slow to respond to the international disintegration of stalinism. Their position is now a kind of radical disenchantment, with spasmodic and nostalgic enthusiasm for the ALP.

While not wanting to trivialise the personal acts of dissent from dominant Australian values by some of the intellectuals in Docker's book, we must remember that the political practice of these intellectuals qua intellectuals is the production of knowledge. The political and historical significance of these writers is to be found in what they said and wrote.

This introduces my chief quarrel with Docker: in stressing the two different streams he has overlooked thematic continuities between the two traditions of social
commentary and literary criticism, continuities which stem from constituting themselves as elites. In the remainder of this review I will try to illustrate this criticism.

The production of knowledge, like the production of things, requires a means of production. The creativity of any writer is not reducible to some ineffable personal essence, as many Romantic the theorists say. Writers use a certain intellectual apparatus in their work, their means of production of knowledge, which they do not necessarily affirm. It consists of certain assumptions, an intellectual framework or "problematic" within which certain questions and types of evidence make sense, and others do not. The continuity between these two traditions, I would argue, is their sharing of a basic problematic, rooted in their identification of themselves as intellectuals. Both traditions share basic assumptions about what an intellectual is, and the place which intellectuals typically occupy in their society. I refer to the enduring assumption that the intellectual is declassé, alienated, a privileged observer from outside who can discriminate between truth and myth, knowledge and socially-derived prejudices. Marxists who claim to be able to make this discrimination do so on the basis of a conscious philosophical theory, which is external to their personal or political identity. In Docker's writers, however, their perspicacity and legitimacy as commentators is derived from an established social acceptance, a corporate confidence, and, in the case of the Andersonians, an empiricist theory of knowledge, substantiated for some by a necessary bohemian elitism.

Docker would see this assumption of intellectual alienation as characteristic of the Sydney tradition but rather foreign to the Melburnians. He sees the latter according to their own estimate, as central to society, engaged and proselytising the social-democratic ethos. But this account of the Melbourne stance is taken from some of the most optimistic of Meanjin's articles, and is insensitive to the gap between identification with the tradition, and estrangement from the present. In the 1960s Meanjin published several articles arguing the modern alienation of intellectuals or "Reason". Docker notes the rapid alternations between optimism and pessimism throughout Meanjin's (Christesen's) history but does not seem to realise that this came from a deep-seated insecurity about the efficacy of their cultural project. Docker also quotes statements of frank elitism, not able to place them. If the Meanjin intellectuals saw themselves as central to anything it was to a hopefully-awaited democratic destiny, not to a persistently uncongenial present. Vincent Buckley, a Melbourne intellectual from head to toe, in 1962 criticised Australian intellectuals for being job-oriented and for living in "suburbia" and gave as his definition of a true intellectual someone "who would think about the destiny of man and recall some lines of poetry even in a prison-camp".

I think that intellectuals from both traditions see this element of estrangement, of brave universalism in the face of the overwhelmingly contingent, as an essential part of their raison d'etre as writers and teachers. It is a personal affirmation which has the impersonal currency of a profession, in the old sense of the word. And it is this affirmation which binds them all to a particular epistemological stance and certain common tendencies in their theory of society.

The epistemological position is rarely asserted, especially in Melbourne, but it is basically that the intellectual's task is to step back from social engagement, and see through the myths, knock the sacred cows, rise with ethnographic majesty and see the overall reality. These perspicacities are the prerogative of those who by their own affirmation can step outside of history, away from power, money, and mundane concerns.

The characteristic project of intellectuals in both traditions is to deal creatively and critically with society's "mythologies". For both streams society is held together by basic mythologies about itself; for Melbourne, myth and traditions are signs of cultural maturity. For Sydney intellectuals, myths are the inevitable sustenance of most of (benighted) society. Whether celebratory or critical, the privileged perspective of the historian and philosopher, as the custodians of what is deemed mythical, is the same.

For Melbourne intellectuals (and Max Harris) myth needs to be continually criticised and reformulated in social commentary and literature, art and satire. Docker deals with this project of the sustenance of myth as a Meanjin intention.

Their explicit ambition was to make Australian society as rich in mythology as aboriginal culture. This was the task of artists and intellectuals. It was discussed in the series "Letters to Tom Collins" in the 1940s. Historians Russell Ward and Vance Palmer celebrated the 1890s as the Eden of our democratic, socialist, egalitarian character, subsequently undermined by the urbanising trends of the twentieth century. Manning
Clark’s history bemoans the crushing of a native bush tradition by British gentility in the second half of the nineteenth century. Each of these writers has been allowed to be evasive about the factual truth and literary tendentiousness of their descriptions. They have usually been exonerated by a critical consensus that sees history as an expression of a personal vision and as a formulation of society’s necessary mythology. The formulation is celebratory and sympathetic, but includes the possibility of criticism of “outmoded mythologies”.

It is significant that in the less optimistic ‘sixties Meanjin’s attempt at seven surveys of “Australian society after Menzies” were published under the “Strine” rubric of Godzone (God’s own country). Strine, a new mythology with a necessary protective irony; celebration from a slightly disenchanted distance. This irony germinated from an a priori detachment from the myth which always lay at the heart of the most confident Meanjin writing of the ‘forties.

Sydney’s characteristic detachment from social mythology has always been much more scathing; and it has often been backed up by a proud bohemianism and attempts at a sexual honesty whose deficiencies Docker correctly criticises. Anderson’s militant scepticism is the seminal influence here. The homage which Anderson and his confidently-empiricist followers paid to Sorel and Freud was based on their alleged realism, naturalism and objectivity, as opposed to the “metaphysics” of other theories. Anderson quotes Sorel as a source of his own ethics, a realist ethics in which “good” was not a notion but an actual historical force (the proletariat in the pre-war Anderson). This ethical theory was superior to other idealist ones in its realism, he argued. From Sorel, Andersonians also derived the confidence to classify behaviour as “rational” or “irrational”, “disinterested” or “interested”. Reasoning consisted of observation, uncluttered by categories, and worked over by a prior and irreproachable Logic. As for Freud, Anderson thought that psychoanalysis was revolutionary because of its naturalism, its ability to point out the link between an idea and “unconscious” interests, an improved theory for distilling the rational and objective from the irrational and subjective in human thought.

Armed with these critical tools, Anderson could look forward to effective revolutions in thought:

The only revolution properly so-called is an intellectual revolution, “a revolution in ideas”, not any rearrangement of externals. This is what the work of the intellectual producer (of the realist or empiricist philosopher) resides in; not “social levelling” or any other practical understanding but simply making discoveries .... and being concerned with following an intellectual tradition within an intellectual institution. (J. Anderson, Studies in Empirical Philosophy, 1962, p. 359.)

This quote could serve as a manifesto for Libertarians whose principled passivity and intellectual elitism Docker describes. The intellectual project is a non-ideological concern with the ideology of others. Docker laments its decline into a technique of personal authoritarianism (Libertarian women who criticised sexism were accused of penis-envy).

But the more substantial case against this project is that it discourages a commitment to a materialist interpretation of Australian society. They cannot see that the myths which sustain society have as their basis, not the herd-like gullibility of “the masses”, but objective conditions of existence, and particularly the conditions of existence, and particularly the ideological apparatuses of capitalist state power: the family, the churches, the mass media, and educators and writers like themselves. They are thus left with an elitist fatalism about society which suits political preferences right across the spectrum, except for those who see in objective circumstances the possibility of revolution.

Donald Horne and Peter Coleman would be the most influential commentators to have come from the Sydney milieu. (Both have been editors of the Bulletin). Their criticism is strictly of the iconoclast variety. Never ill at ease with Australian capitalism, they align themselves intellectually with a broad coalition of anti-Establishment tendencies (anti-monarchist, anti-politician, etc.) in which union leadership, self-seeking politicians, bishops, and protectionist business interests seem to share blame equally for any Australian malaise. With this pluralist framework they can only identify obvious “interests” and “irrational” tendencies a fundamentally reformist social criticism.

The Andersonian commitment to the irrationality of society’s beliefs and behaviour was handled in different ways. The stance of Left-Libertarians has been more critical, and celebrates a more “rational” Bohemian ethic. Others, like Horne, Coleman and P.H. Partridge, more engaged in the social sciences, were influenced by American theories of mass society, and the unattached and besieged intelligentsia. The early Cold War was the time
in which they began to publish, and they were clearly influenced by the anti-communism of Anderson and American theories of social collapse through mass hysteria. Except of course that in Australia, rather than any dangerous swing to the left, we saw the entrenchment of a firm anti-communism; and so these theories became an opportunity to celebrate the retention of a “healthy” conservatism. They wrote benevolently and half mockingly of the myths that allegedly sustain social peace in Australia.

Thus Horne (on Anzac Day): “It is not a patriotic day, but, as Peter Coleman said in The Bulletin, a ‘tribal festival’, the folk seeing itself as it is - unpretentious and comradely.”

Coleman, defending censorship: “It had come to the view that censorship was symbolically useful as a form of community protest against degradation.”

That the Sydney presumption of community irrationality could cease being contemptuous and become ironically approving underlines the basic similarity between the Melbourne and Sydney problematics. The above quotations reveal a definite convergence between Andersonian and Meanjin social commentators. Docker can illustrate a conflict between the two over concrete issues in the 1940s but this conflict did not last any longer than Meanjin’s fragile optimism about Australia’s progress to an ALP, Furphy-inspired, democracy. Once this confidence in the Australian radical ethos died, new sustaining myths took its place. But the new myths were more and more derived from satire, the new social archetypes of Barry Humphries and the celebration of ‘strine’ noted above. The commitment to myth always contained some degree of critical reserve, and by the 1960s the reserve had more to feed on. Optimism became satirical celebration, a platform where Ian Turner’s lecture on Aussie Rules, Boyd’s description of “suburbia” and Horne’s patronising approval of Anzac Day could meet with little discomfort. All three accounts of Australian society incorporate the same posture of intellectual pessimism about the masses, In 1972 they were united over the ALP, on the one hand a mellow iconoclasm towards the epigones of Menzies, on the other a rather desperate optimism about social democracy.

There has been one outstanding example of the convergence of the two traditions in their social criticism which illustrates the common irony about mass society, in the popularity of “suburbia” as an image of postwar Australian civilisation, and of “classless”, post-Keynesian affluence.

The term “suburbia” has its origins in the social commentary of Edwardian England, to describe the lower middle class civilisation of suburban London, with its desperate emulation of the gentility of the wealthy and powerful. It quickly passed into the vocabulary of contemporary Melburnians Louis Esson and Vance Palmer. In 1921 the latter bemoaned the decline of the ethos of Australian radicalism (the Legend of the Nineties). He was reacting to the failure of the working class to force a transition to socialism after World War I, a betrayal of pastoral radicalism by a spiritless urban culture, he thought. He called it “dominance of villadom”. He contrasted “sophisticated villadom” with the radicalism of the bush and complained that the energy of the nation was now being wasted on the “supply of boots and chocolates to the suburbs”. Between the wars, a contempt for suburbia was part of the corporate assurance of Sydney bohemians. After World War II, when “socialist aspirations” were again disappointed, “suburbia” was again taken up as an image of an electorate preoccupied with domestic trivia, rather than political affairs. For Robin Boyd it was an image of an aesthetically-conservative ethos; in Patrick White it became a symbol of the dispirited materialism which surrounded and thwarted the spiritual heroes and heroines of his novels - very much a Vance Palmer antithesis. Finally, in the ‘sixties, “suburbia” became an explanatory image of social complacency, in the work of both Horne and the Godzone writers.

“Suburbia” is not just an image of some intellectuals’ estrangement and elitism however. It is a “concept” of great currency among intellectuals who regard themselves as social critics. It contains an assumption and a conviction of social consensus. (Horne: “The genteel have been vulgarised, the vulgar made more gentle. People now enjoy themselves more in the same kind of ways.”) Here is a popularised cliche of modern sociology, the end of class conflict. Because the problematic within which these intellectuals work focusses so exclusively on the subjective side of social life their interpretations are easily bemused by similarities of life style. They neglect the objective divisions between capital and labor which have never left Australian society, despite the appearance of social peace in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties. It is the Australian version of the Cold War “mass-society” thesis.

The word “elites” in Docker’s title is more than a reference to the personal elitism of certain intellectuals; it refers to the basic assumptions by which most Australian social critics, even on “the left”, have produced knowledge of our society.