ADAM BLACK, MINER, WOLLONGONG, 1903 - PERHAPS

A bookseller's catalogue having contained an item potentially of much local interest, I paid the rather stiff price, enticed by the first item of contents: a letter dated "47 Daisy Street, Wollongong, December 19, 1903". The title page of the pamphlet reads: Adam Black (Miner). His letters to his Son, Jim, on matters Interesting & Important to Workmen. Edited by Albert Dawson, published in Sydney in 1904. On arrival the rather tatty booklet was found to have 110 pages, containing the rude outpourings of a homespun philosopher-economist promising a field of worthwhile research. The text consists of fourteen letters. True, Adam did not indulge sonny Jim with idle chit-chat, but plunged into earnest discussion and forthright advice, albeit expressed in a racy and colourful style. Yet incident was not lacking; letter 12, dated February 4, 1904, begins: "Dear Jim, - a slab of the roof came down on me yesterday, and nearly polished me off. When they got me out I was a good bit bruised, and had been presented with a broken arm, so I'm a gentleman now for a few weeks, with nothing to do but think. But down in a coal mine is, to my fancy, the best place for quiet thinking...." In all it was beginning to seem that one had had one's money's worth out of the purchases. What, then, of Adam Black?

It is not perverse to begin the account of the investigation by telling about Adam's editor, Albert Dawson, obviously a literary gent. The Mitchell Library contains nothing else on Black, but apart from editing this booklet there are two other Dawson items, the first published in 1887. Then comes the editing of Adam Black's outpouring, and finally a large book of 1927.

First things first. The 1887 work by Dawson is stated to be Part 1 of
a series entitled "The Civilized Barbarities of the Nineteenth Century", and this part, entitled *Royalty, by Albert Dawson, Dedicated to the Church of England Clergy*, was published by R. Bear, of Sydney. This must have been the man who conferred a knighthood upon himself, presumably for services as a vendor of bilious books, advertising himself openly as "Sir Robert Bear, Bookseller", despite the absence of royal patent or any other shred of justification. This early production of Dawson’s was an exercise in ratbaggery: a wide, perhaps youthful, diatribe against the monarchy, openly republican, with thumping side-swipes at the clergy who led prayers for the Queen and Royal Family, and at armies as bands of murderers under the leadership - naturally - of members of the Royal Family. Accusing Queen Victoria of rank dishonesty, the Prince of Wales of an appalling depth and breadth of sin, and William IV of disposing of creditors by exporting them to France to be guillotined, the 32 pages by Albert Dawson must have created quite a stir. Not surprisingly, there was no Part 2 to the series.

Then came Dawson’s attentions to Adam Black, of which more anon. Thus one can move on to what was clearly Dawson’s magnum opus, 396 pages published in London in 1927: *Mind and Life from Atom to Man*. Its subtitle is even more obfuscating: "Demonstrating that Mind is coeval with, and inseparable from, Matter and Energy. With special reference to matter in Heredity, mental therapeutics, the immediate nature of psychic phenomena in spiritualism, and to a possible physical limit to human intelligence." A potential reader’s despairing cry for mercy is answered by a quoted extract from a press review: It [the book] explains satisfactorily, the phenomena of many things concerning which valuable time has repeatedly been wasted in useless speculation. Hypnotism, the fear instinct and panic, personality, genius, Christian ‘Science’, memory, sleep, dreams, the brain of the ant, and many other matters are illuminated in the simplest language....’ Two comments arise: the language would surely need to be simple, and what on earth have scientists since then been wasting their time and the taxpayers’ money for, when all the answers were set out in 1927? And, moreover, in simple language. Albert Dawson clearly had all the answers; his understanding of the mind of the ant might in itself be expected to be the answer to those pests getting into sugar-pots. Let nobody remark nastily that after more than half a century since Dawson’s enlightenment they still do.

It does not come as a surprise in the light of this great work, that the Black book contains a voluble advertisement for Thermo-chemical baths, run in Sydney by ‘Albert Dawson, Specialist in Chronic Nutritive and Functional Derangements’ Judging by the extravagance of his claims, it is safe to say that Albert was a versatile quack, with a literary bent to
disseminate his wide-ranging radical views.

So much for Adam Black’s editor; what, then, of the editee, Adam the Miner of Wollongong?

(To be continued)  Edgar Beale
PART II

As a literary gent, and despite the forty years elapsing between the ratbaggery of Royalty and the Newtonian and Einsteinian revelations of Mind, Life, Atom and Man - and ants - Albert Dawson was not idle, if only because his magnum opus could not have been tossed off in a mere couple of decades. He had not forgotten Adam Black's homespun philosophy-economics.

This is shown by the repeated editions of Adam's letters - no less than three - because whilst his editor achieved only one edition each of his own Royalty and the clue to life in ants and men, Adam has three. The first, as has been seen, was in 1904, when the illuminating titles of the letters were: Slaves and Fools; Increasing the Population; Primary Wealth; Providing Employment; Pauper Labor; United States; Keeping the Money in the Country; Labor, Value, and Price; Encouraging Local Industries; Taxing Finished Products; Extract of Beef; Other People's Money; Great Nation Business; The Right Track.

As if that were not enough for a natural thinker like Adam, the second edition adds two more letters: New Protection, and Land Values Taxation. New Protection was something of an about-face, because the first edition had been of a Free Trade slant which might nowadays bring much of the Trade Union movement descending on poor Adam with a more crushing devastation than that roof-fall which caused him only bruises and a broken arm. The other new chapter, supported by advertisements, showed plainly that Adam Black's thinking had succumbed to that of Henry George and his Single Tax. The Letters - and advice to son Jim - remained otherwise much the same; but there was an important difference in this edition, published in Adelaide in 1912: Adam's letters were not edited by Albert Dawson, but by (meaning presumable written by) the same literary gent. This was strange; but that possible error was
redressed in the third edition of 1930, printed in Armidale, N.S.W., in which Dawson reverted to editor, and Adam again was shown as author.

This is not the place for a summary of Adam’s teachings, and indeed a summary would be very difficult. Far from providing any preliminary family news or background on life in the mines or a mining community, Adam consistently plunges into his subject-matter as directly as William Hazlitt ever did. True, we gather that Jim was a blacksmith, married, and living somewhere out of his ‘old Dad’s’ region. The first letter ends with a PS reporting that Jim’s mother and sisters are quite well and send their love; ‘the old woman’, presumable Granny, ‘is getting a bit doddery’. Later we learn that the doctor has arrived to look at Adam’s broken arm, and elsewhere that, letter-writing being dry work, Adam is going to the pub for a drink. Indeed, he makes it plain that he always prefers handling a pick rather than a pen. Yet he handles the pen effectively, though sometimes with the force of a pick, as when he recommends that wooden-headed political bounders should be soused in the nearest and dirtiest waterhole available, or brained on the spot. But, sadly, of what a local historian seeks there is nothing. Adam could have written just as forcefully from any other coalfield; and, seeing that he favoured doing his elementary thinking ‘as I sit on a chunk of coal having a quiet smoke in the blackness of the pit’, it might have been better is he had. If the Bulli mine disaster of 1887 had escaped his notice, then 1903, when he wrote his first letter, was a year in which the wreckage of the previous year’s tragedy at Mount Kembla was still being cleared.

All of which raises the question: was Adam real? Doubts are deepened by the fact that Wollongong had no Daisy Street in 1903-4, or since. But perhaps the best clue comes from the 1930 edition. Perhaps the cat was out of the bag already when it is recalled that the second edition was stated to be by Albert Dawson, the third being again edited by him. Though there are textual differences, the booklet is essentially the same in structure. One difference is that the letters are dated anew. The year is now 1930, and yet the same fall of rock had just fallen on Adam, bruising him and breaking his arm as it had twenty-six years before. Moreover, in 1930 Adam could repeat, almost without change, what he had said in 1903: ‘I’ve sat on a chunk of coal at smoke, oh!’ — obviously in the pit — ‘and thought around things....’ Smoko in the pit! If that malpractice is conceivably credible of 1903, it is not so for 1930, so long after the passing of the stringent Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1912, under which it was an offence even to take tobacco or matches into a mine. If you can accept Adam on this point, you must accept that he did not know his business as a miner any better in 1930 than he had in 1903. In other words, it is not to be believed that the thinking behind the booklet was the work of Adam Black; it must therefore have been the work of Albert Dawson himself, maybe after luxuriating
in the stimulation of one of his thermo-chemical baths. Clearly, Adam
was a literary myth.

Therefore as a contribution to local Illawarra history, even as a
curiosity, the Dawson/Black effusion is useless. But that is not to say
that it is otherwise without value. For a student of politico-economic
thought it may well stand as an interesting but general example of
radical tendency, the interest being enhanced by the growth and change
evident in the three editions over nearly three decades. Yet for
Illawarra itself it remains a lost opportunity. Pity!

E.B.