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Abstract

Why has Anzac captured the Australian national imagination? Is it a substitute for Christianity, a form of civil religion that binds the populace together in a common faith? Is it an expression of Australian nationalism in opposition to the attempts of the British to 'impose' an imperial ideal on Australia?

Keywords

protestant, sectarianism, case, rev, c, t, forscutt, anzac

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Melleuish, G. C. (2015). Anzac and Protestant sectarianism: the case of the Rev C T Forscutt. *St Mark's Review: a journal of Christian thought and opinion*, (231), 58-68.

Anzac and Protestant Sectarianism: the case of the Rev. C T Forscutt

Greg Melleuish

Why has Anzac captured the Australian national imagination? Is it a substitute for Christianity, a form of civil religion that binds the populace together in a common faith? Is it an expression of Australian nationalism in opposition to the attempts of the British to 'impose' an imperial ideal on Australia?

The Anzac ideal is often viewed as an element of the 'natural progression' of Australia from imperial dependency to independent nation, and hence a crucial element in the development of the Australian nation. This is one possible narrative that explains the nature of Australian history. There are others. One of them focuses on the traumatic effect that Great War had on Australia, and how it transformed a dynamic, energetic society into a much more inward looking society.¹ Certainly Australian liberalism faded from view after 1914, only being re-born, in a somewhat different form, in 1944.

If the Great War can be seen as one possible locus for the birth of the Australian nation, it can also be considered as a time of massive trauma for Australians. It shook the self-belief of Australians; the old verity of a faith in progress which would lead to the creation of a peaceful, interdependent world dominated by the British Empire could no longer be taken for granted. The second half of 1914 saw both a manifestation of that ideal in Australia with the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science holding its meeting in Australia, and its shattering with the outbreak of war.

For many Australians one of the key events of Great War did not occur at the Front but in Ireland, from the Easter Uprising in 1916 to the creation of Ireland as a dominion in 1922. Australia had long been home to sectarian conflicts and the history of the country cannot be properly understood if the ethnic and religious differences underlying those conflicts are not given their due. If well into the twentieth century Australians were proudly claiming that they were 98 per cent British, then it is worthwhile enquiring as to what 'being British' meant in Australia. In this context it is worth remarking that in WK Hancock's *Australia* (1930), where the 98 per cent British claim can be found, neither Anzac nor religion are discussed, even though Hancock was the son of a Church of England clergyman.²

¹ Michael Roe, *Nine Australian progressives: Vitalism in bourgeois social thought, 1890–1960*, University of Queensland Scholars Library, 1984

² W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, London: Benn, 1930

Britishness was largely understood in political terms, which focused on a political system and an animating set of beliefs that were perceived to be uniquely British.³ Behind that political understanding stood a much broader set of cultural identifications which were largely Protestant in nature. To be British meant to be Protestant or, at least, to accept a set of Protestant cultural assumptions. It can be argued that Britishness exercised a cultural hegemony in the Australian colonies until well into the twentieth century. For example, it underpins a lot of the discussion in the Federation debates of the 1890s, even the contributions made by the relatively few Catholic participants in those debates. For example, Richard O'Connor, a Catholic who would subsequently become a justice of the High Court of Australia, at one stage argues that 'it is no part of our business and no part of our duty to those who sent us here to decide this question upon any fanciful consideration of natural law, but to take the facts as they are.'⁴ Common law trumped natural law.

Even if there was an acceptance of Britishness as central to the Australian understanding of the political system, this did not mean that sectarianism was not an important constitutive element of Australian culture. The Protestant–Catholic divide was central to Australian society, especially as the Catholic Church refused to accept the state-run schools as suitable instruments for educating its young. There were running sores, including the situation in Ireland and the fact that Catholic education received no support from the state.⁵ But it was never a form of apartheid.

I think that it is possible to argue that the Great War marks the beginning of the erosion of 'Britishness' as the basis of Australian political culture, and with it, the cultural hegemony which Protestantism had exerted over Australian life. This is not to say that it disappeared overnight; both Sir Robert Menzies and John Curtin were powerful advocates of the ideal of Britishness.⁶ But it was no longer taken for granted as it once was. It needed to be inculcated and advocated. Surely it is no accident that the decline in British identity in Australia

³ Greg Melleuish 'Personal Politics and Being British: Political Rhetoric, Democracy and their Consequences in Colonial New South Wales,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, March 2013, 1–14

⁴ Official Report of the national Australian Convention Debates (Third Session) Melbourne: Robert S Brain, Government Printer, 1989, 64

⁵ A full and definitive history of sectarianism in Australia remains to be written. See Michael Hogan, *The sectarian strand: religion in Australian history*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1987, Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910–1925*, Citadel Books: Sydney, 2002; Benjamin Edwards, *Wasps, Tykes and Ecumaniacs: aspects of Australian sectarianism 1945–1981*, Brunswick East, Vic, Acorn Press, 2008.

⁶ Judith Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, New Edition, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007, James Curran, *Curtin's Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011

coincides with the decline of all the major traditional Protestant denominations in Australia, and that it accelerates from the 1960s, once it had become very clear that Britannia no longer ruled the waves.

SGD Green has written of the 'passing of Protestant Britain', rather than the secularisation of Britain, during the period 1920 to 1960.⁷ This makes sense because Protestantism had, until the Great War, been so clearly entwined with British political culture, as indeed was the case in Australia.

Now it may be asked what all of this has to do with Anzac. I think that it is possible to see the Anzac ideal as a restatement of Britishness in a new context and framework. CEW Bean was the product of an English public school and his ideals of character are nothing new, except that they were now to be found in a group of colonials with a democratic temper, not the public-school educated elite. True Australians were expressing their belief that they were more British than the British.

It is in this context that I should like to consider the activities of the Revd Charles Thomas (CT) Forscutt in the 1920s. Forscutt is what could be described as a footnote person in history. There have been three recent studies, including a privately published family history and a chapter in a book on the activities of members of the Enmore Tabernacle of the Church of Christ.⁸ Yet Forscutt is important because he was a very early advocate of organised tours to both the Western front and to Gallipoli. He made such a visit to the Western front in 1922 when he was unable to organise a group tour.⁹ Given that he had been too old to fight in the war himself and had no sons who had fought in the war, it is worth asking why he became such an enthusiastic supporter for remembering the sacrifices of the troops in the war.

This desire to remember and commemorate the war must be seen in the context of Forscutt's other activities in the 1920s. These focused in particular on the threat which Forscutt believed that the Irish in Australia and the Roman Catholic Church posed to the civic culture of both Australia and the British Empire. This led him to a series of attacks on the Roman

⁷ SJD Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change c1920–1960*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁸ Noelene Hudson, *The Life of Charles Thomas Forscutt 1857–1931*, self-published, ND, Harold E Hayward, *C. T. Forscutt: The story of an educational entrepreneur*, Churches of Christ in New South Wales, Occasional papers in History and Theology Paper No 3, 2012, Harold Hayward and Dennis Nutt, *Enmore Incorporated: Pioneers of Churches of Christ in New South Wales*, Rhodes, Freshhope, 2014, ch. 11.

⁹ 'Tours to the Battlefields,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1919, 7, 'Pilgrimage to Gallipoli,' *Cootamundra Herald*, 13 October, 1925, p. 2.

Catholic Church, especially in the years 1922 to 1925, with particular emphasis on the issues of marriage and education. He expressed those ideas primarily in the Protestant newspaper the *Watchman* and in rallies held at the Sydney domain on a Sunday afternoon. He was a leading light in the Protestant Defence Association. On occasion, as discussed below, his activities at the domain led to what amounted to mini-riots. He lobbied hard to be appointed as a Protestant voice to the New South Wales Legislative Council in 1924.¹⁰ He was denounced in the Catholic press of the day as an ultra-Protestant.¹¹

In a more positive vein Forscutt was a fervent advocate of both national patriotism and the British Empire. One of his last activities was active involvement in the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Captain Cook in 1928.¹²

The important thing about Forscutt's activities in the 1920s is that he was in his sixties and essentially retired. There is very little indication of what was coming in his earlier life and his background did not mark him out as a future empire loyalist. The war and its impact with regard to Ireland had clearly disturbed him and led him to believe that the established order was under threat. SGD Green has argued that 1922 had enormous implications for British religious history as it took Roman Catholicism out of the equation. This was not the case in Australia, and particularly New South Wales. That year saw the election of the most Protestant government the state had ever seen. Sectarian divisions were heightened, especially for the next three years.

It is the contention of this paper that if Forscutt's advocacy of pilgrimages to Great War sites is considered in the context of his anti-Catholic activities then, for him, what would become the ideal of Anzac should be considered as an attempt to preserve what he understood to be the British and Protestant nature of the Australian political and social order. It was part of an attempt to maintain the 'Ascendancy'.

Forscutt was born in Kapunda, South Australia of immigrant parents recently arrived from Britain. The family subsequently moved to Melbourne where Forscutt senior ran boats on Port Phillip Bay and had a farm at Portarlington.¹³ Family stories indicate that Forscutt

¹⁰ 'A Protestant for Upper House,' *Watchman*, 20 November 1924, 2.

¹¹ 'A Brazen Voice in the Domain,' *Freeman's Journal*, 21 August 1942, 24

¹² Captain Cook Bi-Centenary 1928: Souvenir of the Bi-Centenary Celebrations arranged in the Cleveland District, Middlesbrough: Sanbidge Press, where he is listed as one of the vice-presidents of the organising committee on page 5.

¹³ 'Early Melbourne,' *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 16 August, 1907, 32

senior had drinking problems, which may be part of the reason why the young Charles was converted to become a member of the Church of Christ.

In 1878 he went to Kentucky where he spent eight years at Kentucky University completing the Arts course of the College of Arts and the classical course of the College of the Bible. Hence his intellectual formation was primarily American in origin. As a Church of Christ minister he was never part of what might be described as part of the 'Anglo establishment' in Australia. In their fascinating study of a number of significant individuals associated with the Enmore Tabernacle in Sydney, Hayward and Nutt describe a high achieving group in business, education and politics, the most famous of whom was the department store owner, Marcus Clarke. These were self-made men who had an impact on the society around them.

Forscutt's primary life work was not to be in the ministry but as an educationalist. In the 1890s he established Rockdale College as a school for boys, which subsequently changed to Bexley Ladies College in 1909. The school continued until the 1950s. Forscutt had clear connections with Liberal/Nationalist politics. The sporting cup for Rockdale College was the Carruthers Cup, named after the local member and Premier of New South Wales from 1904 to 1907. He hosted a function for Joseph Cook at the school during the election campaign of 1914.¹⁴ His brother-in-law, RT Ball, was a liberal/nationalist politician who served as a minister in the Nationalist government in New South Wales from 1922 to 1925.

It is quite clear that Forscutt was an energetic and forceful character, an educational entrepreneur and a man of learning and intellect. He chose to take the classic course at college even though it was not required for his ministry studies. He began a magazine for girls in 1909 and gave occasional lectures on educational issues.¹⁵

But there is nothing in the extant records to indicate the intense activism that he would undertake after his retirement as Headmaster of Bexley Ladies College in 1920 at the age of sixty-three. What might be described as his twilight years did not lead to gardening or leisure pursuits but to an extended period of cultural warfare in which he took up the cudgels on behalf of Protestantism, the British Empire and national patriotism. It is quite clear that all three of these causes were closely related in his mind. 'Protestants must stick closely together,' he claimed, 'against the forces—foreign forces—which would introduce

¹⁴ 'Prime Minister at Bexley,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July, 1914, 10

¹⁵ *The Girls Companion*, Sydney, c. 1910, 'The Child Mind,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January, 1904, 5

republicanism into this continent of Australia.’¹⁶ There were two major enemies in his mind: the bolsheviks, mentioned only occasionally; and the Roman Catholic Church, or rather the Irish Catholic Church. This cultural warfare contrasts vividly with his earlier activities and the sort of optimistic activism described by Hayward and Nutt as being characteristic of ‘Enmore incorporated’.

The problem was that Ireland was no longer British; and Forscutt saw many Catholic priests coming from Ireland harbouring anti-British sentiments. He put it this way:

Many RC priests are out to set up their authority against the *Australian democracy*. These Irish teaching brothers, being imported from the South of Ireland, cannot expect to teach loyalty to King and country.¹⁷

‘Irish-Australians’ would remain outside of the mainstream and come ‘to be the same trouble to us that they are to Americans in their country.’ Forscutt’s sectarianism was not aggressive but defensive; he feared that the Protestant British Australia in which he had grown up was now under threat and that he needed to shield it from its enemies. Of course, this may be the reaction of an old man to a world that had changed so strangely from his youth. It was no longer a matter of building new institutions as he had done in the 1890s.

For Forscutt, there was no conflict between being British and being Australian; the two were complementary. Australians, he claimed

Should constantly be taught patriotism. No man’s education is full and complete unless he is well instructed in all the advantages of Australia above other countries, and of his own duties to his native land.¹⁸

He defended the saluting of the flag in New South Wales Public Schools and the singing of the National Anthem, yet averred that such practices were not embodied in legislation but were the consequence of a Ministerial Minute. He warned that ‘if the next Minister of Education was a Roman Catholic citizen, he could remove that minute just as easily as it was

¹⁶ ‘Fighting Forscutt Ferocious: Remarkable Address at Goulburn,’ *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, 3 October, 1924, 3

¹⁷ C. T. Forscutt, ‘The Teaching of Patriotism in our Public Schools,’ *Watchman*, 20 November, 1924, 6 (my emphasis).

¹⁸ Forscutt, ‘The Teaching of Patriotsim’

placed there by a Protestant Minister of Education.’¹⁹ Such, he claimed, had happened in Queensland.

In another article Forscutt was cited as saying that ‘patriotism should be encouraged by the display of prominent Australians in the schools.’ He declared that ‘bolsheviks were everywhere.’²⁰ Clearly he believed that ensuring state schools remained a bastion of loyalty was a necessary means of ensuring that young Australians were educated in the appropriate values. Protestant schools, including his own Bexley Ladies College, could also be trusted to educate children properly; the real problem were the Catholic schools staffed by members of Irish religious orders. What is curious is that his characterisation of the Irish in the 1920s is not all that different from the way some commentators describe adherents of Islam today.

On Sunday 29 June 1924 Forscutt spoke at a Protestant Defence Association meeting at the Sydney Domain and a motion was put to the meeting calling on Parliament ‘to put down all scandal in the public schools, and to provide that no Roman Catholic or alien should be allowed to teach children in New South Wales.’ Forscutt claimed that in ‘Roman Catholic Schools they taught more about Ireland than Australia.’ The ‘second generation of Irish children’ needed to be brought up as ‘pure-blooded Australians.’ There were frequent clashes during the address, leading to three men being arrested on charges of ‘riotous behaviour.’ At the end of the meeting Forscutt and his friends required a police escort to the tram, which was then chased by a crowd of several hundred people.²¹ On 24 May 1925 a similar riot occurred at the Domain, which led to a fight for the Union Jack on the platform and a baton charge by police.²²

Forscutt’s defence of what he described as Australian patriotism and democracy was not in any way in conflict with his support for the British Empire. Far from it. To be an Australian patriot was to be British and, hopefully, Protestant. Discussing the coming visit of the British Fleet, Forscutt stated that ‘its coming to Sydney should prove a tonic to all patriotic persons, who love the old land of our fathers, as well as our own native Australia.’²³

¹⁹ Forscutt, ‘The Teaching of Patriotism’

²⁰ ‘The Flag, Patriotic Lessons in Schools, Protestant Society’s Desire,’ *Northern Star*, 21 November, 1924. 4

²¹ ‘Sectarian Strife: Clash in Sydney Domain,’ *Singleton Argus*. 1 July 1924, 2

²² ‘Excitement in Domain, Union Jack Falls: Police use batons,’ *Singleton Argus*, 26 May 1924, 2

²³ C. T. Forscutt, ‘The British Fleet is Coming,’ *Watchman*, 13 March 1924, 8

He advocated writing patriotic songs, and having ‘everybody everywhere singing patriotic community songs during the stay of the Fleet.’ He even provided a couple of examples of such songs which he had written, of which I provide a specimen:

It was the Dear Old Motherland,
That made Australia safe and grand,
She found those seas beyond the sea,
She built up States—then set all free.²⁴

The British fleet was needed to protect Australia, so there is a strong pragmatic element to this patriotic fervour. It also fitted in very nicely with White Australia and the need to defend Australia from the Asian hordes. ‘Nothing is more certain, he claimed, ‘that if we do not protect ourselves we shall be over run by other nations. It is up to us to have a strong navy, and to induce the white races to settle on our broad acres of land.’²⁵ This belief in the unity of Australia and Empire can also be seen in a pamphlet that Forscutt wrote when he visited Britain for the bicentenary of Captain Cook’s Birth in 1928. Here was another pilgrimage which he made to celebrate the man whom he saw as the father of Australia. In the pamphlet he declaimed:

Britain has handed over to us Australians—children of the early migrants—THE MEN WHO MADE THE EMPIRE—the ownership, the control and the development of over one-third of the total area of your own vast Empire.²⁶

There was a need for Britons to help complete the task of empire. Interestingly for a clergyman, he stated that though he had come on a ‘Mission of Mercy for the Motherland’ he did not mean ‘spiritual undertaking—though, perhaps your empty churches may even need that—we have come with the gospel of bread and butter.’ Australia, he claimed, did not want Orientals, who were ‘of no value on the land’.²⁷ Nor did it want the ‘an□mics, diseased derelicts, and the miserable misfits of Europe’.²⁸ It wanted true Britons to build up the land.

²⁴ Forscutt, ‘The British Fleet is Coming,’

²⁵ Forscutt, ‘The British Fleet is Coming, No. 2,’ *Watchman*, 20 March, 1924, p. 5.

²⁶ Forscutt, *Captain Cook Bi-centenary, 1928: A patriotic appeal to Australians now visiting London*, ND, Wicliffe Press, Finchley.

²⁷ Forscutt, *An Australian’s Appeal to the Land of his Fathers*, ND, Wicliffe Press, Finchley.

²⁸ Forscutt, *Captain Cook Bi-centenary, 1928*.

Forscutt's views on the unity of Australia and the British Empire were not eccentric or extreme. There was popular enthusiasm for both Australian patriotism and the British Empire. This can be seen by the Epilogue 'declaimed' by Miss Dulcie Deamer, later to become the Queen of Bohemia, in the Pageant Play of Empire held at the end of 1923 to usher in the Festival of Empire:

And now kind friends our play has reached its close,
Though there remains a final episode,
To be enacted, wherefore I recall
The earlier events of this review
When Celt did slay Barbarian, and Rome
Did bring enlightenment unto our shores;
Gave us our spirit of bold adventure,
And Norman welded all the elements
Of what became the mighty British race
But this remem'bring, and our stage now set
With symbols of our Empire powerful,
We must proclaim as greatest of our sons,
Greater than Roman in his proudest day,
Greater than val'rous Celt or Saxon bold,
More daring e'en than Dane; greater than all,
Because he doth possess the best of all—
The Immortal Anzac.²⁹

The case of CT Forscutt provides an insight into the mentality of those who sought to claim the remembrance of the Australian troops who fought and died in the Great War. It is interesting that neither of his attempts to encourage his fellow Australians to make visits to the Western Front and to Gallipoli bore fruit. This did not prevent him from making one such visit in 1922. It is interesting that by 1925 he was referring to making a 'pilgrimage' to Gallipoli. In both cases the pilgrimages did not eventuate. Maybe the financial cost of such journeys was just too great for many people.

²⁹ Festival of Empire: Pageant Play of Empire: Souvenir Programme, ND, James & James, General Printers, Ashfield.

What is of greatest interest is how his advocacy of remembering the war dead was connected to his other activities. Forscutt sought to defend both Australian democracy and the British Empire against what he saw as the dangerous forces that sought to undermine them, specifically bolshevism and Roman Catholicism. He wanted to confirm the traditional belief that to be British, and hence to be an Australian patriot, was to be Protestant. The two were, in many ways, inseparable. Consequently it was necessary to claim the remembrance of the Great War dead for British/Australian Protestantism. That he needed to act so vigorously to defend his Protestant ideals is perhaps an indication that they were losing their vitality.

But, of course, Forscutt is just one figure who embodied this particular set of ideals and beliefs. He points to a powerful connection between Protestant sectarianism and Anzac, a connection which requires further investigation.