

**David Crouch, *Colonial Psychosocial: Reading William Lane*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2014, 196pp
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It begins with an anecdote, related at third hand. David Crouch opens his incisive and intermittently exhilarating account of the colonial author, radical and agitator William Lane with Vance Palmer describing how, during ‘a sweltering summer in Brisbane,’ writers Sydney Jephcott and Francis Adams were startled by a ‘ghastly apparition’ on the ‘dusty roadway’ before them. Jephcott takes the limping figure for Mephistopheles. Adams hisses “‘shut up! It’s Billy Lane”.” For many in late colonial Australia, Lane was the Messiah rather than the Tempter. Crouch does not venture a biography. Lane is lightly sketched—club-footed, adamantly teetotal, fiercely industrious, geographically restless and—especially through his own weekly magazine the *Boomerang*—‘able to pour his ideas into the moral marrow of colonial print culture.’

Having arrived in Australia in 1885, from Britain via Canada, Lane wrote first for the *Worker* and then, after he founded it in 1887, for the *Boomerang*. Two years later he was involved in the creation of the Australian Labor federation and subsequently the shearers’ strike, out of which the Labor Party grew. His most famous work was the ambiguously titled novel *The Workingman’s Paradise*, published in 1892 (its title was borrowed from a phrase in Henry Kingsley’s novel, *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, 1859). Lane’s narrative, ‘driven by ideology, and styled as social realism, wandered colonial Sydney and mused on utopia.’ By the following year, he had left Australia for good. Together with more than 200 members of the New Australia Co-operative, among them the poet Mary Gilmore, he travelled to Paraguay to establish a utopian community of which, Crouch judges, he would be the ‘aspirant dictator.’ When the scheme fell apart (although some settlers remained: the story was most recently told in Anne Whitehead’s *Paradise Misaid: In Search of the Australian Tribe of Paraguay*, 1997) Lane ended his days in New Zealand, writing as ‘Tohunga’—Maori for prophet—for the *Herald*. He died in 1917 just before his 56th birthday.

Crouch’s main objective is to highlight how Lane ‘encouraged uneasy obsessions in the cultural imaginary’ of colonial Australia. He canvasses the different reckonings that have been made of Lane—as radical nationalist, socialist, Puritan, commanding figure of the nascent labour movement and (especially since the demolition in Humphrey McQueen’s *A New Britannia*, 1970), racist and xenophobe. Arguing that Lane’s ‘disturbed obsessions ... are coeval and continuous with broader social pathologies,’ Crouch suggests that ‘Long before Lane’s arrival white Australia had developed an apprehensive culture; it was always aggressive and uncertain about its edges,’ riven with ‘spatial and racial anxieties’ that were connected in febrile public discourse. The feared Asian invader in the late nineteenth century was not Japanese, but Chinese, and they were already in Australia, present in significant numbers since the gold rushes of the 1850s. Thus the Chinese constituted an enemy both within and without, albeit one that seems ‘also to have exerted a peculiar fascination for [Lane].’ They were those ‘who do not fit—that troubling surplus to which Lane constantly returned.’

One of the pleasures of *Colonial Psychosocial* is the panache of Crouch’s style, making this an uncommonly enjoyable analysis of literary, cultural and psychological phenomena. For example, he speaks strikingly of how Lane’s writing ‘contributed to the hypochondria of identity in Australia.’ Central to his argument is Lane’s notion of spaces—threatened and vulnerable, perhaps barely defensible. These are both the domestic sphere of the home and the

nation at large, especially ‘the permeable north,’ through the racially mixed, then European-minority port of Darwin, and of course the wombs of white women at risk of Chinese penetration. When Lane enters a Chinese space, an opium den whose languorous and beguiling iniquity he would report, another kind of invasion occurs. As Crouch elegantly states the case, this is the smell of the drug: ‘the olfactory senses physically disturb the sense of boundary, smells infiltrate, they are shared, they envelop, cling and violate.’ And such intrusion, as Lane revealed in his ‘Daylight and Dark’ articles for the *Boomerang* (modelled on Marcus Clarke’s ‘Lower Bohemia’ sketches of Melbourne) was to be found in central Brisbane in the 1880s.

In 1888 Lane serialised his short novel ‘White or Yellow,’ subtitled ‘A Story of the Race War of A.D. 1908’ in the *Boomerang*. There he imagined ‘the Chinese occupation of Brisbane, and their violent expulsion by white guerrillas.’ This was not a tale of military invasion, such as Kenneth McKay’s *The Yellow Wave: A Romance of the Asiatic Invasion of Australia* (first published in London in 1895), but of a take-over by Chinese who were already lodged in Australia, led by the millionaire Sir Wong, and their willing white collaborators. Sexual contamination is narrowly avoided. One white woman is happy to be murdered before she is raped, while Wong is shot before he can impregnate his bride. Crouch wonders to what extent Lane’s writing influenced the anti-Chinese rioting that took place in Brisbane on election day, 11 May 1888? This raises a more general question concerning the evidence that is marshalled about Lane’s political influence. Crouch offers anecdotal support in regard both to the rioting and to the chequered rise of Labor; notes the circulation figures of the *Boomerang* (where Lane only stayed for a few years); speculates how pivotal Lane was in the shearers’ strike. Finally, though, he relies on our consent to that connection marked before between Lane’s ‘obsessions’ and colonial ‘social pathologies.’

Obsession with racial purity and invasion of inadequately protected Australian spaces led Lane to ‘imagine the streets crowded with ambiguous creatures living in the cracks of the city.’ The opium dens become ‘the architectural evidence of Australia’s physical and moral degradation.’ He enters; smokes a pipe. Crouch calls this ‘surveillance’ both ‘violent and aggressive,’ while conceding that it ‘also involved an undercurrent of ambivalent desire.’ Sexual is one implication. To be tempted in that way, if indeed he was, led Lane to resort to ‘the languages of contagion,’ ‘images of violation, pollution, and deformity.’ Here Crouch’s guide is Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). The Chinese might invade houses, women’s bodies, indeed the whole country, as Lane shifted his disquiet to the Northern Territory. Thus, Crouch argues persuasively, ‘the porous north became a cipher for the many spatial anxieties of the south.’ It was time for Lane to look elsewhere—or nowhere—to the socialist utopia propagated by characters in *The Workingman’s Paradise* and to the New Australia that might be constructed an ocean and a continent away, in Paraguay.

New Australia is one of the legends of the 90s, if not paramount in Vance Palmer’s book on that subject. The movement was imbued with a *fin de siècle* apprehensiveness. In imperial romance fiction, such as Rider Haggard’s *Allan Quatermain* (1887), as in some of Rudyard Kipling’s late nineteenth-century verse, the likely demise of the British Empire was a source of deep and elated pessimism. ‘Civilisation’ and its benefits were also called into question. Crouch shows Lane on a parallel track, believing that ‘“Civilisation” had lost the violent spirit that Lane thought necessary to bring change.’ A corollary was ‘the radically anti-urban turn of Lane’s politics.’ New Australia, a venture into the Paraguayan hinterland still home to native Indians that Crouch deems to be ‘essentially an invasion,’ was the realisation of such a belief. Further, Crouch contends, ‘this kind of utopic delusion [was] bound up in the psychologies formed at the edge of a new century, a new federation, and in the quickening advance of

modernity.’ Ned and Nellie, bushman hero and socialist heroine of *The Workingman’s Paradise*, part, but only to meet again in Paraguay. Lane and his adherents soon followed.

Crouch now ventures into fresh territory of his own, exploring the ‘links between the racialized relations of colonial societies and the formation of fascistic movements in Europe.’ In 1886, a few years before the foundation of New Australia in September 1893, Doctor Bernhard Forster and his wife, Elisabeth Nietzsche, fervent believers in an Aryan master race, had established the colony of Nueva Germania in Paraguay. Later Elisabeth would doctor the writings of her brother, Friedrich, to make them more anti-semitic, or so Crouch contends. Not in question is that the first branch of the Nazi Party outside Germany was set up in Paraguay. In effect, Crouch portrays Lane—among the many other affiliations pressed upon him—as a proto-fascist. Thus ‘like the fascist impulse, [Lane’s] withdrawal involved a restless desire for action, a dismissal of the old system, and the dream of a new politics and society arising from its ashes.’ Instead, ashes were what became of Lane’s authoritarian dreaming. Having abandoned the colony, he relocated in one of the most remote countries in the world, New Zealand, where he spent considerably longer than his eight hectic years in Australia.

The final turn of *Colonial Psychosocial* is towards analogies between late colonial Australia and the nation’s present time. First Crouch argues that in essence Australia’s anxieties have from the first European settlement ‘been spatial ... about alien landscapes, the empty centre, tyrannies of distance, invasions from the north, and the isolating effect of an Anglo country in an Asian geography.’ From that premise, Crouch suggests that ‘the anxieties of placelessness, of the outlands and the outcasts, of impure intermixing and bad blood, clearly resonate in contemporary dispositions towards the refugee.’ He discusses the paranoia of Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech, the rabble rousers who inspired the Cronulla race riots in 2005 (Allan Jones on Sydney radio this time; Lane in the *Boomerang* in Brisbane in 1888), ‘the anxious politics of border protection’ and ‘how the politics of contamination shadows the politics of exclusion.’ His book was published too early to have armoured itself with ‘trigger warnings’ about the likely offence that its material might give to Chinese Australians, but the *Boomerang* evidently had foreknowledge of ‘fake news.’ After reporting that ‘a Mongolian suicided’ at Rockhampton ‘to save himself from the fate of Sir Wong,’ the writer (probably Lane) added ‘We do not vouch for this, but think it very probable.’

From its playful, noun-free title onwards, *Colonial Psychosocial* is a sustained and sprightly study of the social and racial pathologies (Crouch’s preferred term) of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia. In passing, the book analyses how ambitious men (and some women, outside this story) made a living in and out of print, with alacrity and endeavour, in the colonial period; traces popular forms of xenophobia, particularly as directed against the Chinese and inflamed by Lane; tells of one of the most curious episodes in the history of Australian utopianism; follows the political trajectory of Lane – one that has been so variously and contradictorily described - but no doubt felt consistent to him. In one of many telling observations, Crouch particularises his subject’s unease as a new century advanced: ‘isolation of symbolic enclosure is impossible because the bridged oceans and narrowed lands have been populated with hybrid crowds.’ Such unease has carried into the next century. While he will be disappointed at the many typos in the book—Cambridge Scholars Publishing was surely paid to do better—Crouch should be congratulated on his original, acute and engaging study of yet another once important figure from Australia’s colonial past whom he has rescued—just—from obscurity.

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