

Francis Adams's Construction of the 'real Australia' in *The Australians* (1893)

MEG TASKER, UNIVERSITY OF BALLARAT

The Australians, published by Francis Adams in the year before he died, is an influential and remarkable book with many flaws, not least in its construction as a text. It is written in a slapdash style, with paragraphs of two or three sentences, and abrupt changes of topic (*The Australians* 11). Nonetheless, when A.G. Stephens wrote his overview of Australian literature for *The Commonwealth Annual*, *The Australians* was one of only two works of criticism that he selected for praise (the other being G.B. Barton's *The Poets and Prose-Writers of New South Wales*). Stephens described Adams's book as 'the best study of Australian character yet written' (*A.G. Stephens: Collected Writings* 83).¹ It is certainly one which has been frequently cited and quoted by historians and cultural analysts, as well as literary historians throughout the twentieth century, as one of the clearest early articulations of the famous Legend of the Nineties.

In this paper, I set myself a task that would be necessary for a certain chapter in the book I am writing, that is, a critical biography of Francis Adams which would, at some stage, have to discuss his contribution to the much-discussed, perhaps almost exhausted, Legend of the Bush. Or is that the Australian Legend, or simply the Legend of the '90s? In any case, I was conscious that my impressions of the Legend (whatever it is) were probably superficial and full of gaps, so I set myself to cover the critical history, with a particular view to how Francis Adams's *The Australians* was drawn on in the seminal texts (and I use the word carefully).

Imagine my horror when I discovered that even scholarly articles on the subject sometimes simply quoted fragments of *The Australians*, ignoring for whatever reasons the full complexity of its representation of Australian society. It happens all the time, of course, but a particularly significant example can be found in G.A. Wilkes's 1977 essay 'The Australian Legend: Some Notes Towards Redefinition', which was later included in his book *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* (1981). In this essay, Wilkes cites *The Australians* as a shrewd but romanticised description of the bushman as the emerging Australian type. He doesn't ignore Adams's references to the darker side of bush life—the heathenism, recklessness, pessimism and hardship, or the elements of class struggle - so much as mention these points in order to ignore them (308-11). As Peter Pierce put it in his chapter on 'Forms of Literary History' in the Penguin *New Literary History of Australia*, 'Eventually one of G.A. Wilkes' main achievements as a literary historian may be seen as the investment of the radical nationalist position with more coherence than it had ever itself desired' (85). This applies as much to *The Australians* as it does to Vance Palmer's *Legend of the Nineties*—both are thoughtful books which canvas a wider range of issues and possibilities than the Legend of the Legend might have us believe.

Wilkes isn't the only one to quote selectively. Adams is famous for his epigram about Culture and Society in Australia being like snakes in Iceland; and certainly, he can be quite scathing about the Philistinism and social pretensions of second-rate socialites and artists in the Australian colonies. It is worth remembering, however, that

Culture and Society with capital letters are not precisely the highest values Francis Adams looks for in Australian society. He is scathing about aspects of Australian culture and society because he sees them as part of a played-out pseudo-Englishness, rather than being the best Australia could produce. As the 'Preface' to *The Australians* explains, he sees Australian society in general as being strong enough to wear a little criticism.

A more damaging charge, I think, arises from Adams's association with the promulgation of a masculinist bush ethos, which has been characterised by Marilyn Lake in its more extreme manifestations as 'libertarian misogyny'. While Lake's essay on 'The Politics of Respectability' by no means places Adams at the centre of the masculinist myth-making, she does illustrate aspects of it with two quotations from *The Australians* and one of Adams's *Songs of the Army of the Night*. None of these passages deals directly with gender issues. One is simply his praise of J.F. Archibald as a journalist, another is Adams's celebration of 'the one powerful and unique national type yet produced in the new land', the Bushman. The third was a short poem contrasting a solitary bushman in the city with a crowd of lower middle-class courting couples, which may be read in class as well as gender terms as favouring the sturdy independence of the bushman. A similar independence, it is worth noting, is identified by Adams in the characters of bush girls and women, as well.

To show this, I draw your attention to that part of his work which deals explicitly with gender issues, namely pages 152-3 and 182-3 of *The Australians*, which is consistent with Adams's consciously advanced views on women in general.

The sexes meet from early youth (when they sit side by side at school together) on a platform of something very like equality, and their relations are frank and unconstrained, with the inevitable human results of good, bad, and indifferent.

The young Australian man is wanting, to a large extent, in the egregious impudence of his English fellow, who, a loose, not to say a gross, liver himself, demands the immaculate in his womankind.

Australian conjugal loyalty and affection spring, rather, from the same point for both parties, and are continued to the same point.

The Australian girl will not sink her individuality in that of her husband, and tolerate neglect and even outrage under the rococo plea of fulfilling a divinely ordained 'duty'.

The domestic tyrant, therefore, husband and father, wears no aureole round his hat as in this country, but figures simply as the selfish wretch he is, and runs a fair chance of seeing his spouse 'skip' with somebody else, while his friends and neighbours opine that 'she did quite right'. (152-3)²

Elsewhere, in novels, such as *John Webb's End*, or stories such as 'Kate Robinson' in his collection, *Australian Life*, Adams writes approvingly about the 'New Woman' of the 1880s and '90s, and dismissed the Victorian ideal of feminine subserviency in marriage as a 'rococo' convention from which Australian girls were blessedly free. He may have been wrong about the freedom, but at least he wished to see it. As G.A. Wilkes said in the essay previously mentioned: 'It is not required that a national myth be strictly true' (320). It is also not necessary that everyone who contributes directly or indirectly to a particular strand of popular mythology should share its limitations.

Rather than set out to describe any more accurately what the concept of the 'real

Australia' offered by Adams is, I will examine what it seemed to be saying to some contemporary readers, and some of the questions this raises. First, a brief look at the book's reception, and what it was perceived by others to be purveying as 'the truth' about Australia.

When Francis Adams offered the manuscript of his book *The Australians* to the English publisher T. Fisher Unwin in 1892, it was assessed twice by their reader, Edward Garnett. Garnett also read the manuscripts of two novels which were rejected on his recommendation. On the whole he thought Francis Adams was clever but conceited, too self-consciously modern in his technique, and too hasty in some of his conclusions. Even the novels smacked, to the conservative Garnett, of the 'new journalism' associated with W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, but he thought that a book about Australia written in this style would do quite nicely. His opinion of *The Australians* was:

The book is bound to create a rumpus, whatever else it does, and the more aggressive it is the better. The Australians will think it highly overcoloured and full of 'rot,' but the plain fact is they never have had even a part of the truth told them, and they are wonderfully anxious, for all their thick hidedness, to appear a great deal more civilised etc than they really are. They are desperately anxious to be well thought of, partly because they think such a tremendous deal of themselves. Adams will be cursed and reviled and shown up no end over there, but he ought to be read—and no harm will come to the publisher.³

In his 'Introduction' to *The Australians* (1893), Francis Adams launches straight into one of the book's chief arguments: 'Australia,—the actual Australia,—the Australia of the Australians,—is a largely differing place from the average English conception of it' (9). While this sentence emphasises the difference between an on-the-ground view of Australia and the distant view obtained by the English public from their reading on the subject, it soon emerges that Adams sees the authenticity of his own account as depending on a willingness to tell even unpleasant truths, as much as it does on directness of experience. What Adams deems to be the average English conception of Australia is evident in his 'Preface', where he states:

A few Englishmen talking nonsense about England to Australians, a few Anglo-Australians talking nonsense about Australia to Englishmen, have now become something very like an organised, self-advertising chorus of social cliques, while timid and narrow-minded political leaders in both countries, aware that all this clamour amounts to nothing, are waiting to see if anything verifiably genuine can yet proceed from it before they declare themselves. (*The Australians* 2)

Adams's talk of 'Anglo-Australian nonsense' and something 'verifiably genuine' may be related to Garnett's notion that Australians would be unwilling to hear 'the truth' about their society. Both suggest that what Adams is offering is 'the real Australia', as distinct from the lies and illusions commonly circulated. Garnett sees the myths as being self-congratulatory on the Australian's part, Adams sees them as a political conspiracy to retain Australia as an outpost of Empire, and a social conspiracy to perpetuate the social inequalities and capitalist oppressions of the old world. In both cases, however, the writers speak in terms of truth and validity. A different approach is evident in many of the reviews of this book. While they dispute or praise the factual accuracy of some sections of the book, other considerations are taken into account.

As Edward Garnett predicted, reviews of *The Australians* in the Melbourne *Age* and *Argus* newspapers took a tone of angry repudiation, with the *Argus* reviewer spluttering:

It is hard to guess what was the object of Mr. 'Francis Adams' in writing his disjointed, distempered book, *The Australians* (Fisher Unwin). Is it to recommend Australians to the world, or to widen the gulf between them and Englishmen? (*Argus* 27 May 1893:13)⁴

Some English reviews were negative, others were positive. The *Review of Reviews*, for instance, praised Adams as an impartial critic and recommended his book to all who had anything to do with English foreign policy as it affected its Australian colonies.⁵ A survey of the reviews soon reveals that they are divided, not along lines of place loyalty as Garnett's report might have suggested, but on political grounds. This in itself calls into question the possibility of any 'true' account of Australia, if there were a single reality. It also raises the question of the extent to which Adams is claiming to offer the truth about Australia, and on what terms.

In his Preface to *The Australians*, Adams is quite open in saying that his account of Australia is intended to remedy what we might call the disinformation activities of a group which is not only Anglo-Australian, in the pejorative sense of the word as used by Adams, but more specifically associated with Imperial Federation. In this book written for an English audience, Adams discreetly does not pursue the republican option still favoured at this stage by the *Bulletin*, but he does adopt the slogan of the *Bulletin* and of Sir Thomas McIlwraith, 'Australia for the Australians', and he argues strongly against the presumption of Australian loyalty to Empire which underpinned the projects of the Imperial Federation League. The League was formed in 1884, and met chiefly in London, with representatives from Canada and South Africa as well as Australia and New Zealand.

To quote Helen Irving's *To Constitute a Nation*:

The aim of the Imperial Federationists was to unite Australia as one state among others in a great and permanent Federation of the English-speaking Empire, with its centre in London. But faced with the choice between Imperial and Australian Federation, most Australians opted for the latter. Radical nationalists thought Imperial Federation 'a conspiracy of Australian plutocrats, British aristocrats and Queensland reactionaries'. The *Bulletin* believed it would assist Britain's commercial interests at the expense of Australia's ... (29)

Adams concludes *The Australians* with a Postscript chapter on 'Politics and the Colonial Question' from an English point of view. Here he adopts the tactic of quoting a prominent Imperial Federationist, former Governor of NSW, Lord Carrington, on the growing unwillingness of Australians to contribute to the cost of naval defence without more influence in forming British defence policies. Carrington also suggested that the autocratic methods of Tory bureaucracy were alienating the Australians, and that the Colonial Office should take a less high-handed attitude in dealing with Australia. Adams quotes Lord Carrington, he says, 'because English people will listen to unpalatable "home truths" from those whose position and antecedents seem to guarantee a more or less solemn sense of "responsibility" ...' (271).

These comments on changing Australian attitudes in the early 1890s, then, are offered as truths which it is necessary for the English to know—truths which, capable

of being uttered by an Imperial Federationist or a *Bulletin* journalist, must have some basis in reality. It is possible to find similar views expressed, albeit in very different contexts and for different purposes, by such diverse voices as J.A. Froude, Henry Parkes and the *Bulletin* itself. It is also possible, of course, to find equally strong affirmations of Australian loyalty to Britain, the Queen and the Empire, and Adams acknowledges this; in fact, he argues, it is the very predominance of Anglo-Australian pro-Imperial hype that has prompted his counter-argument.

So, what has this got to do with the Australian Legend, or Adams's argument that the true Australian type was evolving in the far outback? It is possible to link the Bushman with foreign policy—Adams does this very explicitly in his discussion of the Australian Labour Movement and its emerging political party—but it is also important to recognise that *The Australians* does more than provide a prefiguration of archetypal ideas which would be more fully articulated in the 1950s. The book is a discussion of Australian society which is aimed at correcting some contemporary misconceptions, and while it claims to be candid it does not claim to be definitive or unbiased.

The actual Australia, as Adams sees it, is not simply a second-rate satellite of the British Empire. To return to some of the opening material I quoted from the publisher's archives and reviewers, Garnett's glee at the prospective discomfiture of insecure Anglo-Australians may have been slightly malicious, but it is not actually that far from the purpose of the book. Yes, Adams might have replied to the critic from the *Argus*, my book is intended to widen the gulf between Australia and England, or at least to ensure that its political future should not be one of commercial and military exploitation, or subservience to Imperial rule.

Finally, I would suggest again that *The Australians* is not, as it might seem, a definitive description of Australian society. Rather, it is an intervention in contemporary debates about how the emerging nation should be constituted. Like Helen Irving's cultural history of Australian federation, *The Australians* is concerned with a wide range of social, cultural and economic forces which informed a shift in the public debate from one proposed model, Imperial Federation, to that of Australian Federation.

If I wanted to be really circular in concluding this paper, I would remind you of the feminist critique of the 1890s presented in the collection of essays, *Debutante Nation*, published by Allen Unwin exactly a hundred years after *The Australians*. And even though I have not done much to relate *The Australians* to the concerns of later nineteenth-century Australian feminists, I might be unscrupulous enough to suggest that what Adams is offering in *The Australians* is not really a manifesto of the Boy's Own Bush Utopia, but a range of social and cultural analyses which do not necessarily assume a masculinist position. My main point, however, is that the very diverse range of subjects which are dealt with in *The Australians*, although not always obviously connected to the big questions of national identity or colonial and Imperial politics, might be regarded as their determining forces—the whalebone, if you like, in the corsets of the Debutante Nation.

Notes

- 1 See also A.G. Stephens, 'Australian Literature', *The Commonwealth Annual*, [n.d.: cutting of article pasted into book Fryer MSS 2/2834].
- 2 See also pp. 182-3.
- 3 Edward Garnett, Reader's Reports for T. Fisher Unwin, Berg Collection, New York Public Library MSS.
- 4 Other hostile reviews include one in the *Melbourne Age* 24/6/1893: 4, and one in the *English National Observer* 6 May 1893: 631-2.
- 5 *Review of Reviews* (London) VII. 41 (May 1893): 545. See also the *Bookman* (London) 4.20 (May 1893): 43-44.

Works cited

- Adams, Francis. *The Australians, a Social Sketch*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893.
- Irving, Helen. *To Constitute a Nation*. Cambridge, London, NY: CUP, 1997.
- Lake, Marilyn. 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context'. *Australian Historical Studies*. 22. 86 (1986): 116-131.
- Magarey, Susan, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan. Eds. *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993.
- Pierce, Peter. 'Forms of Australian Literary History'. *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*. Ed. Laurie Hergenhan. Ringwood: Penguin, 1988, pp. 77-90.
- Stephens, A.G. 'Australian Literature' in *A.G. Stephens: Collected Writings*. Ed. Leon Cantrell. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1977.
- Wilkes, G.A. 'The Australian Legend: Some Notes Towards Redefinition'. *Southerly*. 37.3 (1977): 43-44.