

FRANCIS ADAMS (1862-1893): THE DILEMMA OF THE CULTIVATED RADICAL

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This paper was originally titled 'The Dilemma of the Intellectual Radical'—but in working on it I realised fairly quickly that I was using the term 'intellectual' in a very loose, unexamined way, and that it would be preferable to describe Francis Adams' position as the dilemma of the 'cultivated radical'. He may or may not have been an intellectual—it depends on your criteria, and it's not ultimately what I'm interested in—but he certainly cultivated his identity and credentials as a representative of modern aesthetic culture, as well as being a radical promoter of the labour movement in England and Australia.

A commentator several decades ago described the effect of Francis Adams on Brisbane in the late 1880s as being rather like a hawk swooping on swallows (Hadgraft 44). He was certainly more sophisticated than the local journalists, and more revolutionary than the local socialists. His personality, appearance and manners were all strikingly attractive, if a little arrogant. He wrote poetry and fiction with strange, dreamy characters of ambiguous sexuality; he wrote poems full of the harshest invective of the Corn-law rhymers; he wrote scathingly sarcastic critiques of middle-class Philistinism and upper-class selfishness; he wrote optimistic eulogies about the potential of Australia to become a land of peace and plenty, with democratic virtues akin to those of ancient Athens. He wrote in practically every genre except the epic, which was out of fashion at the time, and he wrote thirteen books before his death at the age of thirty.

Francis Adams wrote himself into Australian literary, political and cultural history as the voice of socialist democracy. He then wrote himself, as an educated man of fastidious taste and culture, out of a place in the brave new world he envisaged. He did this literally, in his poetry, essays, fiction and journalism, and I'll use a couple of these texts to explore the problem presented by Francis Adams as an over-educated, over-dressed socialist in the 1890s.

His book of radical verse, *Songs of the Army of the Night*, caused a stir when it was first published in Sydney, in December 1887, and (according to Mary Gilmore, Sydney Jephcott and others) continued to inspire socialist writers and thinkers in Australia for some years.¹ In *Songs of the Army of the Night*, many of the poems position England as the decaying old world, given over to the worst injustices of capitalism and competition. Australia, not surprisingly, is hailed as the land of hope, if not of glory, and many of the poems are unambiguously republican, threatening revolution if the forces of injustice try to take over the new young society. The poems are passionate, bloodthirsty at times, always totally committed to the ideals of democracy—more so, it would seem, than Adams was in many of his other works. The poems are the dramatised utterances of the working class, rather than the direct personal (and semi-literate!) statements they were often taken for by reviewers. Nonetheless, the radical end of the political spectrum they portray is one with which Adams

frequently identified, and did much to promote in the journalism and other writing he produced during his six year stay in Australia. Predictably, reviews were polarised: contemptuously dismissive in the mainstream journals, earnestly appreciative in more radical organs.²

During his time in Australia, Francis Adams was more than a mere tourist—he wrote and travelled, but he also married, worked and lived as a local. The *Boomerang*, in fact, was prepared to include him in its cast of ‘all Queensland’ writers for the special Christmas issue of 1888. The Advertisement for this issue reads:

Every line in the Christmas Boomerang was written in Queensland by Queenslanders. Every stroke in the Christmas Boomerang was drawn in Queensland by Queenslanders. Every plate in the Christmas Boomerang was engraved in Queensland by Queenslanders. The entire get-up of the Christmas Boomerang is wholly and solely and distinctly colonial.

The list of contributors that follows includes Francis Adams.

As an honorary Queenslanders, then, Adams felt well qualified to tell the English what Australia was really like, and after his return to England he set out to do just that. In 1891 and 1892 he published a series of articles in the *Fortnightly Review* that would later form the basis for his best known book, *The Australians* (1893). In what Stephen Murray-Smith (in his 1969 *ADB* entry) has described as one of the earliest sociological commentaries on Australian culture, Adams set out to disabuse the English public of the fantasies and misconceptions propagated by those he called the ‘Anglo-Australians’ both at home and abroad.

As a journalist in Australia, Adams worked in both the mainstream and radical press. As well as working with William Lane on the Brisbane-based labour papers, the *Boomerang* and the *Worker*, Adams was such a frequent contributor of poems and short stories to the *Bulletin* that some later biographical write-ups mistakenly describe him as one of its staff writers.

His anonymous leader columns for the *Brisbane Courier* between 1887 and 1890 were mainly bread-and-butter work, although he did boast to William Michael Rossetti that the conservative press in Australia was still far to the left of the fashionably socialist *Pall Mall Review*. Referring to the London Dockers strike, he says:

I wrote the leaders here in the Courier, the local ‘stupid paper’, from the start of the strike. Why, they were straight socialism. I doubt the Pall Mall would give me the same band I got in an Australian ‘capitalist organ!’ Think what that means! // Truly I’m proud of Australia, and I count it beyond price to have been here 5 years and thoroughly comprehended it. Here you have a nascent nationality with the dogged resolution to ‘down’ Land and Capital—to have a race of truly free men. (7 November 1889, Angeli Papers, Vancouver)

Adams himself was torn between the values of high culture and social justice, declaring in the Preface to *Songs of the Army of the Night* that only the extremity of England’s social evil was responsible for the ferocity of his verse. He says that he is ‘[some]one who was born and bred a member of the dominant class and whose chief care and joy in life was in the pursuit of a culture which draws back instinctively from the violent and terrible’ (2).

Although he worked hard and passionately for it, Adams scarcely imagined the brave new world under Socialism as one that he could live in, except perhaps in the Utopian dreams of antipodean life that he only briefly entertains in *The Australians*. Of the bush children, for instance, he writes:

I could have asked nothing better of the gods than to have seen children of my own growing up like these, with the addition of the one thing needful to make them the democrats of the future. Given an education, not the mere seeds, but the perfected flower and fruit of the modern culture, ‘the best that has been thought and known in the world’ of literature, of science, of art, of music, what could not be hoped for from children such as these? Athens actually existed. (*The Australians* 173)

At other times, however, he was conscious that he, and others of his class who espoused Socialism and the cause of Labour, might have no place in a mass culture in which the

abolition of privilege meant that the lowest common denominator of taste might prevail.

In contrast with the bayonet-brandishing of *Songs of the Army of the Night* and the tone of assured confidence in *The Australians*, Adams's late essay 'The New Capitalist' offers a more ambiguous, dramatic juxtaposition of views on democracy and the social values that go with it. It takes the form of a fictional dialogue between two old friends.

The nature of the conversation is primarily the explanation and justification by one of the men (Jack Daniel) to the other (Gerald Hastings) of Daniel's apparent abandonment of the social ideals they had shared as young men. Both (like Adams) had rejected the values of their privileged class in the face of the misery of the masses, and both are shown as having spent much of their energy in the seven years since they last met in exploring social problems and trying to formulate answers. Hastings is, at the time of their meeting, a labour organiser in London, after a number of years in the United States—Daniel has become a captain of industry with a reputation as a strike-breaker. Hastings may have a lot in common with Adams himself, who claimed to have ruined his own health in the years before he migrated to Australia in his struggles to organise labour in London, but, as the title suggests, the dialogue also offers an explanation of his old friend's position as a *new* style of capitalist, a man of principle rather than mere greed and expediency.

This man, Jack Daniel, justifies his opposition to total rule by the masses by stressing the importance of culture not only to the quality of life, but to the very survival of the species. Hastings, on the other hand, regards culture and scientific advancement as secondary, even irrelevant, to the great struggle for human equality and justice. In a letter he says:

to me, too, beauty and knowledge are very dear—art and music, literature and science. I too would 'fain occupy myself with the abiding'. But *that*, I think, can never be. *That* must be for our children's children, if even for them. But whenever it be, provided only that it be—not for a handful of them—not for a few—no, nor even for many of them, but for *all*—then I should indeed be content! (90)

Daniel, on the other hand, regards the cultivation of the intellect as essential to the survival of the species, and regards the plight of the masses as only part of a larger problem. In the struggle to survive the depredations of Nature, mankind must not allow stupidity to conquer intelligence—the masses must be mentally elevated or, if that is not possible, must not be allowed to stifle the gifts of those who do possess genius.

Daniel's ideal, against which every question must be tested, is 'Civilisation as a spiritual and mental unity in infinite variety, but ever as a unity, based on the scientific enslavement of Nature'. In practical terms, this comes down to two things—'the cult, at all costs and all hazards of intelligence, and [the] cult, at all hazards and all costs, of the physical satisfaction of the individual; and of these two, if they clash, as ignorance and greed perpetually make them clash, then the first, first!' (103).

When Hastings demurs at intelligence being placed before the physical needs of humanity, Daniel shifts from theoretical arguments to an argument of pragmatism—because the physical needs of humanity are so imperative, the cult of physical satisfaction stands to win—'Nothing in the long run can stop it'. It is the very *dominance* of democratic forces that makes it even more imperative to place culture first. In the only part of the dialogue which refers explicitly to Australia, Daniel uses the labour situation there to illustrate his argument:

Labour shows us in Australia, where it is alone yet powerful enough to have anything like a free hand, what it is really after, and the civilisation which it rules will be a hell of mediocrity, pululating into corruption and decadence.... It will not advance us one step towards the true civilisation, not to say towards the resolution of the great human problem. (104)

While the exploitation of labour is of concern to this 'new capitalist', he is more agitated about the exploitation of the 'men of intelligence'. Both this issue, and the negative view of Australian society, meet in a telling sentence which steps aside from the formal and fictional structure of the dialogue in order to report the view of someone rather like Adams or one of his Australian friends: 'A really clever and able journalist told me that in Australia he found it

hard for years to earn as much as a bricklayer' (104).

The meeting of minds in this dialogue is given emotional force through the strength and passionate quality of the friendship. It demonstrates a possibility of interaction, if not of resolution, between divergent viewpoints, and the respect of the two men for each other, transcends political difference in a way that would not be possible in the world of polarised class loyalties presented in *Songs of the Army of the Night*. This brings out different aspects of Francis Adams' often contradictory persona—the man of culture and the impassioned radical—and presents the contrasts in terms that are not purely intellectual.

There is a kind of humility required of the cultivated radical as he/she faces the possibility that the desired social revolution might bring about a new order which rejects or discards ideals of culture, taste and intellect such as those shared by these two characters. Hastings attempts to transcend this difficulty, seeing it as a personal issue and asking: 'Who am I? What am I? What does it matter? The idea is the greatest of our time—the hope the most superb, the faith the most intense. That is enough for me' (105). Predicting that Socialism will conquer Civilization as surely as the new day will dawn, he perhaps speaks for Adams when he admits:

And there are moments—there have been, and doubtless there will be again—when I have been glad that I have lived now, in the dark and doubtful hours of the night, rather than in the full flood-tide of exultant day....I am very thankful for death.

('A New Capitalist' 105)

Instead of arguing with Daniel's confidence in Progress, Science and the illimitable power of the human intellect to bring about social change without relinquishing either 'Culture' or some form of social hierarchy, Hastings reasserts his own passionate commitment to socialism—'I don't repent—I, with the narrow ideals and the bewildered vision of a desperate hope and a despairing faith'.

While Hastings does have the last word, it is not a word of argument, but a symbolic gesture:

'Look!' he said, stretching out his hand, his eyes lit, his mouth smiling.

At one steady impulse the sun had surged above the clear horizon line, and soared, huge, round, blazing, and glorious, into the thrilling blue of the heavens.

They stood together in silence, regarding his splendour.

('A New Capitalist' 105)

The two men stand on the brink of an old world, watching the new one which does, it seems, have the power to be born. The new capitalist hopes for a new world in which he can continue to exercise power, and in which the values of his class are still predominant—the other recognises that their world of culture based on privilege is not only doomed but may be simply irrelevant to such a future.

If this new world is figured in the common revolutionary symbol of the sun rising, Hastings' gratitude for death is a personal clinging to the night, at odds with his passionate striving for a new day. His political fervour for democracy is abstract, detached from his personal values and desires. The old 'divided consciousness' beloved of Victorian English poets has become a consciously contradictory political and cultural position for which Adams is able to find no real resolution. This dialogue, at least, does not end up endorsing the position of either party—it dramatises, in fact, the dilemma of the intellectual democrat at the end of a century in which culture and democracy seemed fundamentally opposed. Looking back at the dilemma presented in this dialogue from a late twentieth century postmodern poststructuralist perspective, we may see the broad patterns of emotional and ideological conflict as being relevant to some of our own concerns, as participants in the reshaping of cultural formations in society at large, and in our own areas of intellectual engagement.

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Works Cited

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Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Mary Gilmore's 1953 letter to Marjorie and Muir Holburn (Wilde & Moore, *Letters of Mary Gilmore* 295).
- 2 A conservative review of *Songs of the Army of the Night* appeared in the *Brisbane Courier* (13 February 1887: 7). Even the *Boomerang* was hesitant to endorse the book's more extreme views in 1887, but English radical responses were more eulogistic, particularly to the posthumous editions of 1894 and 1910 (e.g. the *Bookman's* review in May 1910: 94-95). See *Francis Adams: A Research Guide*, due for publication late 1995 by the University of Queensland English Department, for a comprehensive listing of reviews.