

THE LEGACY OF JOHN DUNMORE LANG (1799-1878)

Sybil Jack

The narrative of the early days of the colony of Australia has shifted considerably since the 1920s as the issues that historians then determined to be critical to developments at that time have altered. This has affected historical interest in and description of prominent individuals such as John Dunmore Lang. Few people writing in 2023, two hundred years from his arrival in Sydney, are recalling his role in the early colony as critical in the way that those who reflected on him at the time of his death in August 1878, claiming that “no man living or dead had done so much for the prosperity of Australia,”¹ expected they would. The key role he had played in most ecclesiastical and political disputes in his lifetime made his disappearance from historiography inconceivable to them despite his remarkable personal faults. Although detailed research on his life and work has continued, however, he is no longer the key to historical accounts as he had been then.²

Lang was born a Scot and from a child was destined to be a minister in the Scottish Presbyterian church. He was brought up in the Scottish cultural and Presbyterian religious tradition that placed immense emphasis on individualism. This was the moral basis of a free egalitarian society which reduced the authority of a monarch; rather, the rule of law and limited government were stressed. These were all ideals that became critical elements of Australian culture. Lang, who had been educated at the University of Glasgow (Master of Arts, 1820), unconditionally accepted these beliefs and endeavoured to win support for them in the community. He was ordained for the Australian mission in 1822, and thereafter for the five remaining decades of his life committed himself to vigorously advancing his version of secular government, as well as promoting the Presbyterian church as he defined it, in opposition to the Anglican and Catholic churches in Australia, and also against some Presbyterian churches that did not share his view that the church should be voluntary.³

Lang was elected to the Legislative Council in Sydney in June 1843, and he was later re-elected at various times, although the Council eventually passed an act making it impossible for a clergyman to be a representative. He took every step to press his political ideas on the people with whom he was extremely popular, despite his self-interest and bitter opposition to those who disagreed with him. He largely ignored financial issues, both personally and politically. When he wanted access to the community he started a newspaper – *The Colonist* – in which he explained his reasoning. He was frequently in grave debt and was gaoled for criminal libel when he was unable to repay his creditors, despite the thousands of people who petitioned for his release. For years he was the principal man who established schools for boys and girls at all social levels. He wrote voluminously both on religious and secular topics, frequently opposing the positions of distinguished social leaders such as Governor Thomas

¹ Anon, ‘Public Funeral of the Rev. John Dunmore Lang’, *Evening News*, 12 August (1878), p. 3, at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107935452>. Accessed 16/06/2023.

² A list of research works can be found in: Ian F. MacLaren, *John Dunmore Lang: A Comprehensive Bibliography of a Turbulent Australian Scot* (Parkville: University of Melbourne Library, 1985); D. W. A. Baker, *Days of Wrath: A life of John Dunmore Lang* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985); and more recently, Noel William Wallis, *John Dunmore Lang, M.A., DD* (National Library, 2013) and Malcolm Prentis, ‘Scots’, *The Dictionary of Sydney* (2008), at <https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/scots>. Accessed 16/06/2023.

³ David Stoneman, ‘J. D. Lang, Scottish rights, and the introduction of the 1836 Church Act’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 15, no. 1 (2013): pp. 183-201.

Brisbane.⁴ From the first, his works were polemical; for example, *Narrative of the Settlement of The Scots Church, Sydney, New South Wales* (Sydney, 1828) was a bitter attack on Deputy Commissary General, William Wemyss. His many books and pamphlets set in the ideal distinctive legal and moral theory were a major source of historical and statistical material for political and ecclesiastical legislators around the world. His level of theological intelligence was highly advanced, and tightly identified in terms of defined functions of church and state, which led to his unchanging commitment to particular forms of scriptural interpretation which were at odds with those adopted by many of his fellow Presbyterian ministers.⁵

Despite his criminal convictions, Lang remained critically involved in temporal government, through his prominent role in activities advancing the migration of poorer Scottish and Highland families, and also his commitment to advancing the ideal of democratic, republican and liberal secular government. He took an active part in ensuring that officials of all sorts could exercise rights associated with their functions both in church and state — that ministers of all churches could officiate over marriage ceremonies for instance. He also piloted bills of value to ordinary people through Parliament, such as one to abolish primogeniture in intestate estates. In promoting civic values, he upheld the idea that every man should have his individual right to freedom of opinion and expression. He worked for the separation of distinct parts of the original New South Wales into the colonies of Victoria and Queensland, hoping to see the Australian colonies eventually structured as a federal republic. He accepted various roles as a legislator and introducing Scots of all backgrounds to important roles in the colony.⁶

When Lang died in 1878 his funeral, treated as that of an outstanding Australian patriot, was virtually the size of a royal funeral and was attended both by the top rulers of the colony and representatives of the least. The *Evening News* detailed the procession from the five hundred ‘Chinamen’ who headed it to the several hundred carriages of influential citizens that tailed the governor’s and Chief Justice’s presidential carriages and the carriage of the Council of the Highland Society.⁷ There was subsequently much debate about what would be an appropriate memorial to be erected in the city as some newspapers were recording that New South Welshmen wanted something ‘wider and nobler’ than a religious statue. While they noted the detrimental effect of his manic egotism, authors commonly attributed the early success of the Presbyterian churches and missions to his vision, drive, energy and self-sacrifice.

Lang continued to be discussed in the early twentieth century as a man who was critical to the development of important ideological beliefs in Australia, particularly in Queensland and Victoria where newspapers reminded their readers that “Australian history cannot be written or understood apart from the work and influence of John Dunmore Lang, M.A., D.D., the centenary of whose arrival in Sydney was celebrated this week.”⁸ World War II, however, marked a shift away from the classic religious approach to empire which underlay Lang’s

⁴ D. W. A. Baker, ‘Lang, John Dunmore (1799-1878)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 2 (1967), at <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lang-john-dunmore-2326>. Accessed 16/06/2023.

⁵ Valerie Wallace, *Scottish Presbyterianism and Settler Colonial Politics: Empire of Dissent* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶ This is still best seen in M. D. Prentis, ‘Colonial Ecumenism: Aspects of Presbyterian Reunion in New South Wales, 1865’, *Church Heritage* 1, no. 3 (1980): 219-239.

⁷ Anon, ‘Public Funeral of the Rev. John Dunmore Lang’.

⁸ Anon, ‘John Dunmore Lang’, *Queenslander*, 16 June (1923), p. 3, at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/22644248>. Accessed 16/06/2013.

theological approach to more secular aspirations.⁹ While there has been a new focus on the role of nineteenth century missions and missionaries in recent historical publications,¹⁰ their analysis has not included any particular interest in the role of Lang in the internal politics of the country. The man once seen as dominant as a preacher, politician, journalist, organiser, immigration agent, anthropologist, geographer, and historian¹¹ has been hardly mentioned, despite the fact that he had had a visibly critical role in virtually every political dispute of the day. His disappearance from accounts of the primary political controversies probably has mainly to do with a deliberate turning away from the importance of religious culture in the explanation of wider developments. It may also reflect the massive changes in academic theory in many areas especially philosophy.¹²

Those concerned with the role Scots played and still play in Australian history and particularly their religious contribution should not share this neglect of Lang's life.¹³ Barry John Bridges provides a useful starting point for further study of the significant role Lang played in the complex history of the Presbyterian church and colonial politics in nineteenth century Australia.¹⁴ In this bicentenary year it is appropriate that Lang's contribution to politics and religion in Australia in the nineteenth century be a topic of interest for scholars working on the Scots in Australia and in the wider community. Questions of republicanism and the place of religion(s) in the public sphere remain relevant; a reconsideration of Lang's opposition to the Anglican ascendancy,¹⁵ his views of religious tolerance and diversity, and his pugnacious style in debating controversial subjects, seems timely, if not necessary.

⁹ Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2004) offers a useful overview of the historiography.

¹⁰ See David S. Macmillan, *Scotland and Australia 1788-1850: Emigration, Commerce and Investment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 28; Allan M. Grocott, *Convicts, Clergymen and Churches: Attitudes of Convicts and Ex-convicts Towards the Churches and Clergy in New South Wales from 1788 to 1851* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1980); Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ben Wilkie, *The Scots in Australia, 1788-1938* (Martlesham, UK: Boydell Press, 2017); Rowland S. Ward, *The Rev. John Waterhouse (1789-1842) and His Family* (Wantirna: Self-Published, 2019); and Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder, *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History, 1740-1914* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2018).

¹¹ Frank Hanlin, 'Sidelights on Dr John Dunmore Lang', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* XXX, Part IV (1944): 221-249, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-604674087/view?partId=nla.obj604717568#page/n29/mode/1up>. Accessed 16/06/2023.

¹² See Benjamin T. Jones and Paul A. Pickering, 'A New Terror to Death: Public Memory and the Disappearance of John Dunmore Lang', *History Australia* 11, no.2 (2014): 125-145.

¹³ Useful recent narratives can be found in Rowland S. Ward, *The Bush Still Burns: The Presbyterian and Reformed Faith in Australia, 1788-1988* (St Kilda: Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia 1989); and Rowland S. Ward, *The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, 1846-2013* (Wantirna: New Melbourne Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Barry John Bridges, *Aspects of the Career of Alexander Berry, 1781-1873* (PhD, University of Wollongong, 1992).

¹⁵ C. W. Salier, 'The Australian Ideal of John Dunmore Lang,' *Australian Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1938): 70-76; and Valerie Wallace, 'Sectarianism and Separatism in Colonial Port Philip', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 20, no. 3 (2019), at <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/743262/pdf>. Accessed 16/06/2023.