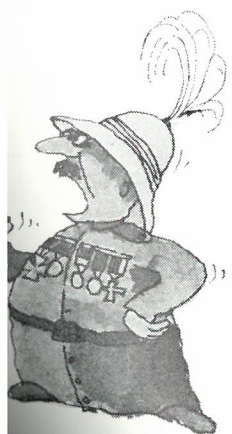


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A REVIEW OF ARTS AND LETTERS

Humphrey McQueen

ACROSS THE MEXIQUE OCEAN

SOME STORIES BY WILL LAWSON; a discontinued stop-over by QANTAS; a visit by Whitlam; a passing suggestion of Serle's: even if this list were trebled its exotic and desperate character would remain apparent. Mexico and Australia are remote. To try a different tack: Nettie Palmer learning Spanish to make comparisons between two colonial literatures; Tom Inglis Moore's more through-going project based on the Phillipines; Cactoblastus and Chris Watson. No. Even by extending the list to include the entire Iberian Empires, there is no way of establishing a lineage for the student of Australia who wants to see his country more clearly from Acapulco. If such a project is to have validity, it must seek legitimacy elsewhere.

So, in an application for extended leave, I explained that the reasons for going were connected with a long-term study of Australia, that I wanted to contrast Australia with another apparently entirely different, but nonetheless colonial society. Mexico offered the greatest number of contrasts: Spanish Catholic against British Protestant; resilient Aztec and Mayan against obliterated Aboriginal; revolutionary rhetoric against conservative constraint; anti-Yankee against 'All the way . . .'. These were some of the contrasts I wanted to test. In other words, is Australia as one-dimensional, as closed, as derivative, and as dependent as I had claimed in my essay for Mayer and Nelson's *Australian Politics: a Third Reader*? Because I was going for only a month, there was no promise of answers to any of these questions. The object was to decide if there was any validity in the project at all. No less importantly, I wanted to get the initial tourist impressions out of the way so that a longer stay would be more rewarding.

Fundamental to the project was a recognition that there had been more layers to the culture of Mexico than of Australia, although their resilience was the point at issue. Conventional ignorance taught me that there were four main streams: Aztec, Mayan, Spanish and Yankee. The first and slimmest volume blew this formulation apart. Indigenous societies numbered a score, and the Aztec became notorious because it happened to be there where the Spanish arrived, rather than because of any intrinsic contribution or virtue. Octavio Paz sees its survival as part of the centralising ideology of subsequent regimes, and as such a monstrous digression from the far more worthy Olmecs. From an earlier work by

Paz, the obvious about Spanish culture became visible: its Moorish strand. This made the task assume the quality of an infinite regress. It was something of a relief to learn of another Spanish import: French culture, which, especially after the execution of Maximilian, was the touchstone for the classes which gravitated around the forty years of Diazatorship. At least French positivism was approachable, something familiar, almost Anglo-Saxon.

So much about Mexican culture is likely to refurbish an Australian's cultural cringe that, these days, it is presumably much more comforting to visit England. The Museum of Modern Art shows Velasco doing, earlier and more grandly, more than the entire Heidelberg School managed between them. Across the foyer are six decades of Mexican paintings which shock with their resemblances to Drysdale, Dobell and Boyd, except that they are mostly of much earlier origin. Or a copy of Samuel Ramos' *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* points to a resolution of the Jindyworobak-Angry Penguin-Classicist debate, although published in 1934, before the Australian version had commenced. In addition, Ramos includes a Mexican equivalent of the 'cultural cringe' — twenty years before Phillips published.

There are two ways in which these facts can be understood. Either they can be used as evidence for the sloth and inferiority of Australian cultural achievements, or they can be appreciated historically. Any attempt at comparative studies makes this issue urgent. To understand the Mexican achievement in art it is necessary to examine the experience of Mexican society, at least from the overthrow of Diaz in 1911. If Mexican art is earlier, grander and more exciting than Australian art, the causes surely lie in the revolutionary experiences under Madero, Villa, Zapata and Cardenas. Equally we should proceed to see the Australian upsurge of 1938 to 1948 in terms of the depression and the war. If we understand him qualitatively rather than quantitatively, there is much to recommend Henry James' maxim that it takes a lot of history to produce a little culture.

These additions and amendments to the tributaries of Mexican life came largely from books, from the two I had read in Australia and from the four I had devoured in Mexico City. Museums and guide books were no less informative. But it was not until we had been there for almost a fortnight that I realised something which had been at the root of my initial decision to go to Mexico, and which I had forgotten. The central Mexican town of Puebla provided the occasion for remembering that I had originally thought of going to Mexico as the first step on a tour of the Pacific rim; that I had been roused to do this by current imperialist activities; that I had been sensitised to it when Manning Clark recalled that he had been directed towards Australian history partly by hearing a broadcast of Laurie Lee's play about Magellan which provoked in him the thought that the Pacific would be the Mediterranean of the twenty-first century; and that Clark's suggestion had been given depth by my reading Braudel's account of how he had written *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.

Puebla boasts of its 'China Poblana'. The story has the quality of a fairytale, but

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is true in outline. A Chinese princess captured by pirates is sold as a slave to a Mexican merchant in the Phillipines, and taken to his home in Puebla, where she establishes a tradition of silken embroidery which becomes adopted as the regional costume. The point is straightforward. Because Spain had posts in the Pacific its ships carried Oriental influences to Latin America, just as many centuries earlier the Aztecs' forebears were alleged to have come from China across the Bering straits and down from Alaska. Another stray fact: in 1910, Shanghai bankers were speculating heavily on the Mexican dollar. And another: the Zimmermann telegram. If a pattern of seaborne trade and contact could be established for Spain, a similar and complementary investigation could be launched around the Portuguese out of Macao and Goa. British activities would be less worthy of study. It might be possible to build a web of great intricacy and surprise.

SOME OF THIS INVESTIGATION OF THE PACIFIC has been done, but largely in a bi-polar fashion. Thus we have surveys of early Japanese contacts with Australia, as well as a substantial volume of material under the rubric Pacific History. Pacific Historians can make no claim to that title as they confine themselves to the islands in the ocean, consider the land masses around it as largely exogenous factors, and rarely the ocean as a system, if at all. Pacific Islands History is not Pacific History; it may well be an impediment to that wider growth simply because its presuppositions are island rather than ocean-oriented. A check of the articles* published in the nine volumes of the *Journal of Pacific History* shows not the slightest trace of the subject being conceived in terms of the Pacific as a whole, and only occasionally even in terms of the South West Pacific as a whole, although this smaller zone is the one marked out in the definitions which Davidson and Maude have offered, the latter explaining, in a 1970 presidential address to ANZAAS, that:

The area with which we are concerned is usually held to be bounded by New Guinea and the Palaus to the west, Easter Island to the east, Hawaii and the Marianas to the north, and Rapa and Norfolk Island to the south. New Zealand is sometimes included when, as in most Maori studies, there is a thematic connexion; but the continental off-shore islands such as Japan or the Aleutians, as well as Australia, are normally excluded, apart from a few marginal cases—the Bonins, Lord Howe and Clipperton Island for example—where individual islands or groups have been connected for periods of their history with the Pacific Islands proper.

It will be argued in reply that this emphasis on islands was a necessary corrective to the old Imperial history, with its view from Whitehall or at best from Government House verandah. But this would be to overlook the origins of Pacific History in the military concerns of post-war Australia, and its survival through a continuation of

* While it was not possible to categorise the articles with absolute precision, the following break-up of the nine issues of the *Journal of Pacific History* gives a strong indication of its island bias. Of seventy-six articles, thirty-five were about specific islands, sixteen about island groups or regions, fifteen were biographical and could have been subsumed into the first two categories, seven were historiographical, two bipolar (both by Americans), and the remaining one was Jack Golson's 'The Remarkable History of Indo-Pacific Man'. Ominously, there has not been an historiographical article since 1971.

those concerns and their extension into economic prospects—not to mention the self-perpetuating professional needs spawned therefrom.

So as not to encourage an excessive cultural cringe, it is worth adding that the California-based *Pacific Historical Review* is no better placed to initiate a genuine Pacific History, despite the fact that its range of articles extend as far as the tentacles of US Imperialism. But it too is concerned with particular places in the Pacific, or at best, with a bipolarity. The Pacific as a possible system is unrecognised.

Yet neither can we be encouraged by the way in which Australian historians treat New Zealand. Matters seem to be getting worse. In the 1940s, there was, at least, *Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand*, but that ceased around 1966, and there has not been an article on New Zealand in that re-named journal since. Ken Inglis' first part of his investigation of the ANZAC tradition makes only three references to New Zealand. This failure to deal with New Zealand is important independently of any illustrations which might arise from comparative investigations like the one Bill Gammage plans into the ANZAC tradition there. New Zealand has to be re-integrated into a history of Australasia. It simply is not possible to understand systematic colonisation, gold, the rise of the labour movement or Federation without including New Zealand as a party principal. No less disconcerting is the recent trend in the *New Zealand Journal of History*. In its first eleven issues it published three articles dealing exclusively with Australia and five discussing trans-Tasman relations. There has been nothing since April 1971, although all but one of the last six issues have carried at least one review of a book dealing with Australia. In the same period, books about New Zealand reached the review pages of *Historical Studies* only every second issue.

Nor can it be suggested that other Australian historians are any better placed to initiate a Pacific Ocean History. The almost total absence of references to geography journals in the footnotes of *Historical Studies*, and the failure of that journal to review D. N. Jeans' *Historical Geography of New South Wales to 1901* re-inforces this criticism. In a related area, it is not surprising that *Meanjin* shows far less interest in New Zealand than *Landfall* does in Australia. It is no defence to say that journals can publish only what they receive. In the review section this is untrue, as editors can decide what books to have reviewed. In the article section editors who appreciated the problem would seek out articles as a matter of policy.

As a Marxist I am uncertain of the validity of Pacific Ocean history as suggested above. Perhaps it is another supra-historical construct like the history of ideas? Or perhaps, in the age of imperialism, it is essential to relocate the focus of class analysis away from the nation-market-state and on to imperialist systems and their conflicts? Marxism has been land-locked because of its emphasis on class struggle and internal contradiction as the dynamic forces in history. Is amphibious Marxism possible? And if not, is Marxism inadequate, or is ocean-based history fantastic?

My general point is this: until we begin to break out of the geo-political confines which have grown up since the old Imperial history rightly fell into disuse, there is

no chance of the Pacific being confronted in the way Braudel did the Mediterranean. It may be that the Pacific is inherently not amenable to that approach, but we should find out, and equally we need to know why it is not, if that does prove to be the case. More modestly, it is time historians once again examined Australia within systems other than those decided at Federation. Geographers and the old Imperial historians, from Ernest Scott to Brian Fitzpatrick, still have much to teach us.

BUT TO SLIP INTO SOME BIPOLARITIES, Puebla provided one end of a contrast which added yet another dimension to Mexican life, namely, the diversity of Iberian Catholicism itself. All of Puebla's many churches are marked by the presence of glass cases containing mutilated Christs, sometimes several in each building. A secret convent contained a sequence of enormous portraits of each of the Apostles, showing in meticulous detail the method of their martyrdom. Savagery of this order was easily attributable to 'Pagan Spain'. Then we came to Oaxaca, with almost as many churches but totally devoid of religious gore, and where even the black garbed Virgin of Solitude can be decked out for the more joyous dates in the calendar. Oaxaca's Catholicism had the outward forms of a pristine classicism married, in its side chapels, to a sumptuous rococo-esque. Enquiries as to the reasons for this contrast between two cities less than three hundred miles apart brought half-remembered facts about their control by different religious orders. It was not necessary to pursue the details further. The difference was sufficient. Moreover, it was important to remember that it was Australia which was allegedly under scrutiny; too close a pursuit of Mexican history might lead me totally astray, at least at this early stage. It at least confirmed my resolve to establish the reality of counter-traditions within the Australian Catholic Church so that Rumble and Duhig can take their places alongside Mannix.

Acapulco was to be an acid test as I had accepted it would be in Australia. If the contrast in cultural richness was to mean anything, it should be apparent within a Surfers-Acapulco experience. Both had reputations for crass vulgarity, for aping the Coca-Cola good life. If my criticisms of Australia had validity, it should have been possible to locate a different response, some form of Mexican resilience, in Acapulco. It was Mexico's weakest link. If it held, it could become the strongest link in my argument. This could make the wish father to the fact. Contrary to oft-expressed opinion, recognition of a potential bias does not make one objective; it can make one deviously subtle — so much so that frankness becomes the epitome of subtlety. Now I want to be perfectly frank about my responses both to Surfers, where I have spent two separate weeks in the past seven years, and to Acapulco, where we spent two and a half days.

Because I lived in Brisbane till I was twenty-four, I shared the intellectual's common prejudice against Surfers, preferring the unspoilt North Coast or Stradbroke Island, but rarely going to any of them. Then, almost by accident, we spent a week

in January 1969 right in the heart of Surfers. I set out to dislike it, but failed. Eventually I saw that the neon hubbub was an invisible silence. The only thing I was conscious of was people whose flesh transmuted advertising into more glorious tans. Another week, four years later, reinforced this judgment and I cannot think of anywhere more relaxing in Australia than 'Ten, the Esplanade'.

So I did not approach Acapulco with any reserve. I was anxious for capital-T type Tourism. But intellectually I wanted it to be different. It should express something Mexican, even if only in its secondary themes. There was no need to worry. Acapulco is totally different from Surfers and from all the other imitation Miamis. Yet the two reasons which I could perceive for this are irrelevant to my thesis. Indeed, the first seems to deny it. It is a simple fact of commercial life that tourists will not travel hundreds of miles and pay enormous sums of money for exact replicas of what they already have at home. If Acapulco is to attract North American tourists it must sell them Mexico, albeit air-conditioned and with sterilised water for the ice cubes. The entire stretch of Acapulco Bay did not have more than six Colonel Sanders' style establishments, while there are local fish restaurants every few hundred yards. So the sad conclusion might be that Acapulco parades its Mexicanisms in order to be even more compliant, less genuinely resistant. This is a complex relationship, and it would be unwise to forget the points made by Elkin about the intelligent parasitism of the Australian Aborigines in a rush to dismiss Acapulco.

The second source of non-brashness in Acapulco derives from its continuing function as a port. It is not simply a tourist Mecca. Far from all its inhabitants work for the tourists in any direct way. It has within it an ordinary Mexican community who are there to earn their livelihood from fishing, farming and port-handling. The existence of a relatively separate economic function cannot be taken as evidence for national resistance, unless it can be shown that the separateness results from some kind of conscious rejection of servicing North American fancies.

Despite this unsatisfactory and ambivalent result, Acapulco might have been the most successful part of the whole expedition. Although there was no answer, the tourist impressions are over, provoking a plethora of new questions with which to justify that longer stay in 1976, or thereabouts.

SO, IN SPITE OF TRAVELLING SEVEN THOUSAND MILES to begin an investigation of a different society in an attempt to understand Australia, I have no fondness for comparative history if that means a search for supra-historical generalisations. Comparative studies are valuable for what they can show about the particularity of each component, and not for establishing rules about take-off, modernisation or mobilisation. They might also provide the initial awareness of social formations hitherto concealed by super-structural elements such as language, politics or culture. Comparisons should be made so that new questions about particular social formations can take shape, not to provide answers about societal characteristics which exist only in the stratosphere.