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'Teaching Human Rights', edited by Alice Erh-Soon Tay in collaboration with Graeme Connolly and Roger Wilkin, Australian National Commission for UNESCO, AGPS, Canberra, 1981. i-vi, 1-216, Index 8pp, recommended price \$8.80.

A book about Teaching Human Rights sounds terribly dull. But the collection of talent in the publication of that name recently released by AGPS turns the topic into a lively and highly relevant book.

It is lively because, far from indulging in the vague, optimistic ringing phrases that so frequently mark discussion of human rights, the contributors to this book of essays do not mince words in the criticisms they voice, both of Australia's record and the achievements of the various United Nations human rights instruments. Within the Australian scene, Professor Lauchlan Chipman and others question whether human rights should be taught at all. Professor Peter Singer asks why rights should be confined to humans and not extended to animals. Gough Whitlam contributes an interesting piece on the human rights record of countries in our region.

The book contains the papers delivered to a symposium organised in June 1980 by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO. The General Editor, Professor Alice Tay, offers with her husband, Professor Eugene Kamenka, an introduction that seeks to pull together the various threads of the contributions to that meeting. It was a high-powered affair with some of the best thinkers and writers in Australia attending. It is a good thing that their collective efforts have not suffered the oblivion which is the deserved fate of most conference papers. The recent establishment of the Australian Human Rights Commission makes the publication a timely one. The success of that Commission will depend upon the extent to which it can capture the imagination and interest of an Australian society more concerned about issues of human rights than it has tended to be in the past.

One of the first papers in the book is offered by Peter Bailey, since appointed Deputy Chairman of the HRC. He outlines various initiatives that have been taken in this country, for default of a constitutional Bill of Rights, to protect specific rights of individuals, including by the law. He mentions, amongst other things, the work of the Australian Law Reform Commission, especially on reform of criminal investigation law. Mr. Justice Hope of the New South Wales Court of Appeal begins by reminding us of the prediction of Christ that the meek would inherit the earth. They have not done so and it is a prediction which the judge is sceptical of fulfilment. He has a few hard things to say about Australian self-satisfaction about human rights:

[L]uck has produced a complacency, a self-satisfaction, almost narcissistic in character. We are continuously looking at ourselves in a mirror, admiring the general blurred picture that our short-sighted eyes see; we do not notice the black spots and smudges that lie across the image.

In proof of this assertion, Mr. Justice Hope points out that in his inquiries about protection of rights in respect of national security legislation, there were few submissions made by a generally apathetic community. He then presents a case study of peaceful assembly rights in Australia. By an analysis of the current legislation, he calls attention to the petty tyrannies that can exist and concludes that if Australia is to put its own house in order, so far as human rights is concerned, it needs to teach about human rights, so that knowledge about them is spread and their importance understood.

Professor Weeramantry of the Monash Law School calls attention to the impediments that stand in the way of access to the courts in Australia. Whilst theoretically everyone has access to the courts to protect their rights, in practice, courts are virtually unavailable to many citizens, either because of legal impediments or sheer cost. But Professor Weeramantry notes the danger of a slanted education which could distort human rights. This is a theme that is to be found repeated through this book.

Senator Sim's contribution makes a prediction : that we are at the early stages of the development of a new and international legal order, whose present contours we can only just begin to see. It is the development of this new international order, including international statements of human rights, which represents an important new legal development, in which UNESCO and the United Nations are playing their part : generally to the apathy, indifference or cynicism of many good citizens in Australia. Presumably similar attitudes were voiced by the barons and even some of the serfs when the common law of England was first developed by the Norman kings.

Mr. Whitlam's contribution is, as one would expect, fastidious in its detail. He lists the Australian record in the adherence to international conventions : something that has always been of great interest to him. It is notable that within days of gaining office, it was Mr. Whitlam's government which signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Ratification came seven years later. Mr. Whitlam urges scrutiny not only of our own record but the record of our neighbours. He points out that adherence to international conventions can be used, if in no other way, as a lever to encourage compliance with the just provisions of the Conventions in domestic law.

The tireless Professor Tay then returns with a contribution of her own about the ambivalence of attitudes in some countries of the world concerning the rights of the individual. In proof that this book is not a tiresome, uncritical exposition of United Nations wisdom, Professor Tay is most scathing in some of her observations about the new alleged human rights, such as the so-called 'right of solidarity'. Professor Eugene Kamenka picks up an earlier theme in warning that education's role is to give an account of things and must be contrasted with indoctrination. Professor Peter Singer develops the same theme. He even questions the title 'Teaching Human Rights' and urges the preferable course of 'Teaching About Human Rights'. He says that it is not possible to be morally neutral. Teachers should not pretend to be neutral. They should make their own views plain and should encourage their students to disagree with their perceptions. Otherwise, he points out, efforts to 'teach' human rights may end up by violating the rights of others.

Professor J.H. McClosky of La Trobe University calls attention to the need for discussion of duties as well as rights. Mr. Graeme Connelly points out that there is still a very active debate about whether there are any objective human rights. Other authors point out that there is still a very active debate as to whether there are any objective human rights inherent in our humanness or whether it is just up to each society and each time to declare the rights appropriate to it. They say it is legitimate to raise the consciousness of students about the issue of rights that are said to attach to humanness, so that they will be less complacent than students often are in Australia about the under-privileged in our society or those against whom laws, practices or attitudes discriminate.

Professor Lauchlan Chipman, never one to avoid a controversy, is as provocative as usual. He takes on the whole edifice of multiculturalism. He expresses fear about inculcation of given values at school, at least if it is suggested that the only values that can be taught are those upon which all ethnic communities will agree. Apart from the difficulty of defining such an area of agreement, Professor Chipman expresses reservations about multiculturalism, to the extent that it 'de-legitimizes' the mainstream of Australian social values.

There are many other important and interesting provocative comments in the book including specialist items on the human rights of women, of Aborigines, of unborn children and, as I have said, Professor Singer's ringing piece 'Whatever Happened to Animal Rights?'

This is a thought-provoking book. It is a useful and well-timed addition to the material available in Australia to teachers and citizens. It may even help replace narcissistic self-satisfaction and complacency about injustice with a determination that our community should measure up well in the world league of civilised countries. The book is well put together with a clever cartoon by Petty on the cover which makes it look less forbidding than some AGPS efforts. There is a good index and in three appendices are contained the principal international human rights instruments. For a kindlier, more tolerant and compassionate Australia, it deserves to be widely read. Happily, and unexpectedly, reading this book on human rights is a pleasure, not a chore.

* Chairman of the Law Reform Commission; Member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO.