

THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL HISTORY
BOOK REVIEW

Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic - A History of Republicanism in Australia 1788-1996*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, ISBN 0521 57258 4.

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I received this book for review on a day when, by chance, I visited the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. On top of the facade of the hospital building I observed a statue which I had not previously noticed. As it fronts the Queen Victoria Pavilion, it is perfectly possible that it is a statue of the Queen Empress' much mourned husband, Prince Albert the Good. I stared at the statute trying to discern the features of its subject because those of Albert are well known. Another statue of him presides over Queen's Square in Sydney, just near the Law Courts. In fact, he looks directly at his wife who imperiously ignores him and stares instead down the vista of Macquarie Street - one of the better colonial thoroughfares in her Australian dominion.

As I examined the hospital statue, passers-by (including a medical practitioner of my acquaintance) began to take notice. Perhaps they thought I had taken leave of my senses and was up in the clouds again. But gradually the image of the statue became clearer. I cannot swear that it is HRH Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria's second son. But it is perfectly possible because the hospital was built as an act of community contrition for the shocking attack on the royal person at Clontarf Beach in Sydney in March 1868. The attack was the work of an Irishman, Henry James O'Farrell. The story is told in Mr McKenna's book.

McKenna recounts that after the failed assassination attempt, "it was easier for colonial authorities to associate republicanism with the spectre of an Irish Catholic rebellion". In the words of one member of Parliament at the time republicanism was an Irish hope - of "Those who sucked disloyalty with their mother's milk". Such infidelity, as McKenna observes, was noted by the majority loyalists in little things. Failure to drink the toast to the monarch on public occasions. Failure to stand in the

theatre for the anthem. Failure to pray for the Royal Family at church. Some contemporary supporters of the moves for a republic (such as Father Frank Brennan SJ) have candidly acknowledged the part played by their Irish Catholic roots in forming the sentiment which motivates them in this regard. There can be little doubt that it was a factor in the motivation of Mr Paul Keating's push for an Australian republic. My ethnic background was different. It lies, for the most part, in the tradition of Ulster Protestants. In that sense, my approach to this book was initially rather unsympathetic. I could see Siobhán McKenna (one of its dedicatees) armed with a sledge hammer toppling the royal statue from the hospital in Sydney at the earliest decent opportunity, once the republic was gained.

Nevertheless, in the context of the current debates about Australia's constitutional arrangements, this is a most detailed examination of the threads of republican sentiment that can be found throughout colonial and post-colonial history. Mr McKenna does not, I think, fully appreciate the strength of the sentiment of affection and loyalty which existed in Australia in favour of

the British sovereign over most of the time that he has chosen for review. Many factors supported this sentiment. Some of them, it is true, are examined in the book. They include Australia's then economic and defence interests which, as Henry Parkes proposed, made it perfectly possible to combine loyalty to Australia and loyalty to the Empire and its Crown. They also included the fairly monochrome character of the settlers' ethnicity, being for the most part from the British Isles. During the 19th century, despite the angry Mr O'Farrell, most Irish subjects were as loyal to the Crown as the rest. The rather dour, dutiful and homely Germanic monarchs who sat on the throne did little to upset the sense of loyalty. Through the reigns of Victoria, George V, George VI and Elizabeth II, at least, the personal respectability, decency and sense of service of the monarch won widespread admiration and respect. Those qualities are what we hoped for in a Head of State. If the period before Victoria was bumpy, the reigns of the Edwards touched by their private loves and if the road ahead with Charles looks a little rocky, the overall picture was one of duty and majesty - things important in a constitutional monarchy.

This is what I find to be missing from Mr McKenna's book: a sense of proportion which helps to emphasise that for the entire period analysed by his book republicanism was a distinctly minority opinion in Australia. It was viewed by most Australians as eccentric or disreputable or both. There is a lot of rewriting of history going on now. We should be careful to avoid it. Yet that does not undermine the historian's abiding duty to search out new facts and to see the past with new insights because of developments in the present and possible trends in the future.

Mr McKenna begins his record at 1788. He offers important perspectives of the way in which the early settlers, convicts and military (as well as the colonial authorities) were affected by republican ideas. In part these derived from the then recent revolution in the American colonies. But in part, as he emphasises, they could also be traced to the essentially republican character of the English constitution as a result of Cromwell's Commonwealth and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. There is a wealth of detail in the early chapters with talk of the

"Piratical Republic" and "the Blue Mountains Republic" etc. For myself, I think it is top down reasoning to suggest that the early colonists were actually plotting the establishment of an Australian republic in the "ridges and chasms of the mountains". Survival was uppermost in their minds. Challenging the benign imperial rulers was not a high priority.

Mr McKenna examines the way in which the colonists sought self-government. He seems to perceive this movement as one to "throw off the yolk" of British rule. I suspect that most people at the time simply saw it (as I was taught) as an assertion of rights which Englishmen enjoyed "at Home" and should quickly have in the colonies beyond the seas.

There is a good examination of Dr John Dunmore Lang who urged a federal Australian republic, after the model of the American nation which he had toured. It was Lang's misfortune that he came up against Henry Parkes, one of the most gifted politicians Australia has ever produced. Parkes was shrewd, ambitious and pragmatic. He effectively marginalised Lang and

his republican views, nurturing the Australian attitude to Britain which was endure right into my own childhood. For Parkes (as Mr McKenna explains) if republicanism was no more than an extension of representative democracy, there seemed little point in declaring national independence when this could effectively be had under the aegis of the British Crown. To Parkes - and the overwhelming majority of Australian settlers at the time - the nation was *both* British and Australian. A weakness of Mr McKenna's analysis is his failure fully to grasp the depth of this sentiment and the pragmatic and emotional reasons which sustained it for more than a century.

Under the bold title "A Victorian Republic", Mr McKenna recounts the story of Eureka. But every time that he seems to be carried along with the interpretation of events as republican in character, he is brought back to the disappointing reality:

"Here again we witness the duality of the dominant theme of nationalism in Australia. The loyalty ... was to an almost independent Australian Britannia, that vision of Australian Britons held by Parkes and Menzies - free of heavy-handed interference from London but retaining the monarchal connection as the symbolic embodiment of the people's legitimacy to govern and the protector of an exiled Anglo-Saxon culture".

The book then turn to "A White Man's Republic" being the story of the run up to federation. There is no doubt that the *Sydney Bulletin* espoused republicanism. But its supporters had to do battle with a growing movement of imperialism which took Australian troops to fight in the Empire's wars. Mr McKenna describes the despatch, on 3 March 1885, of a vessel to the Sudan as Australia's "first sacrificial ship". Those with a taste for anti-imperial sentiment will find the prose in this part of the book congenial. There is talk of "a torrent of imperial loyalty" and "embarrassing 'sycophancy' of Victoria's 'zealous colonial loyalists'". There is faithful reportage of obscure books which describe the history of the monarchy in Britain as that of "plunderers, imbeciles, tyrants, scoundrels, torturers, adulterers, bigots and debauched, crooked, self-willed, heartless liars". This kind of language reminds me of the prose of *The Rock*, an extreme Protestant newspaper of my youth or of books describing the supposed debauchery of priests and convents. It scarcely represents mainstream Australian attitudes. If given too

much space, opinions of this kind present the risk of distorting the understanding of the time as it really was.

It must have been a depressing period for those few with a true republican sentiment in Australia as the nation moved towards federation. Not only were the hard-nosed politicians more interested in trade and taxes than in high flown theories of government. The widow of Windsor kept gaining more supporters amongst the masses with her irritating longevity and successive golden and diamond jubilees. To press a republic upon a people then sheltering under the protection of the world's mightiest empire, literally at the peak of its military and economic power, took a certain eccentric dogmatism. The Australian people may well now wish to become a republic. That will be up to them. But it is wrong to project that sentiment back to the time when the Founders were drafting the Australian Constitution which would establish the indissoluble union of the Australian colonies "under the Crown". A risk of quoting at length anti-monarchal tracts of the 1890s is that it may elevate

minority sentiments to an importance which they did not really enjoy at the time.

After federation, there follows an examination of what Mr McKenna calls "The Imperial Mardi-Gras 1901-1663". Here he steps up the vigour of his language. Take this example:

"... It is not surprising that for the first fifty years of the Commonwealth's existence, Australian media, business and Parliaments indulged in an annual imperial orgy known as Empire Day. Empire Day was the best example of the way in which British paradigms dominated Australian culture, paradigms which were continually bolstered by the public affection for the Royal Family. A succession of "Royal Visitations" helped to bury internal political differences and boost the role of the monarch as a unifying national symbol. The excessive displays of loyalty to the throne, which had always been a feature of Australian public life, were now amplified by electronic media. As had been so often heard, it was the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, Robert Menzies, who took over from where Parkes left off half a century earlier. Between 1952 and his retirement in 1966 Menzies played the role of bell-boy to the Queen Goddess Elizabeth". (p 207).

All of this obviously pains Mr McKenna intensely. Part of the reason comes out in the following passage:

"... How do we explain the fact that many of the Australians who waved enthusiastically as Queen Elizabeth passed by in 1954 were of Irish extraction? The statement of ALP Senator James Ormond in the Senate in 1964 might provide a useful starting point: 'The principal buttress of the

Royal Family is ... I was about to use the expression "the working class" - the little people of the British Commonwealth".

One gets the feeling that this is a reality that Mr McKenna finds it impossible to tolerate. But if it is history as it was, it must just be faced up to. So many people (including so many Irish Australians) may not have been wrong. They may even have been right for their time.

The last chapter is titled "The End of the Affair 1963-1995". Mr McKenna interprets the Queen's departure from Australia in 1963 as "the end of an affair between Australia and Britain which had lasted for almost two centuries". I think most Australians would regard this as hyperbole, or at least dubious. The recent growth in republican sentiment had much more to do with the dismissal by Sir John Kerr of Mr Whitlam, the feelings of Prime Minister Keating and the embarrassing matrimonial troubles of the royal children, than the end of Sir Robert Menzies' long reign as Prime Minister.

Mr McKenna accurately charts the foregoing events and the impetus which they gave to a relatively small band of intellectuals who, by the 1970s, were pressing forward the republican idea. They had little real support until Mr Keating put his very considerable clout behind the idea. From there, with virtually unanimous media endorsement, the movement has acquired much strength. Whether it will be strong enough to change the Australian Constitution (so resistant to formal alteration) remains to be seen. In the place of the Finnean objections to monarchy that can be discerned, never far from the surface, in Mr McKenna's writing, there are now other voices. They urge that the severance of the link with the sovereign is but the natural outcome of historical, economic and legal forces which have been going on virtually since the establishment of the colony at Sydney Cove when the Union Jack was run up in 1788 and "God Save the King" was sung for the first time.

Mr McKenna writes with passion. His deep feeling on the issue of republicanism is clearly honest and true. His book is very nicely presented by Cambridge, although the inclusion of

endnotes at the back of a book in the age of computer formatting seems tiresome and avoidable. The real hesitation I have about parts of the book concerns the apparent unwillingness of the author to accord respect to, or to seek to understand, the motivations of loyalty to the Crown which fuelled the sentiments of his fellow countrymen in earlier decades. It would require a certain arrogance on the part of us who come later to ridicule or belittle the feelings of loyalty and affection which were undoubtedly expressed by ordinary Australians who went before. We diminish ourselves by refusing to understand and investigate those feelings, as true and honest to those who held them, as Mr McKenna's republicanism is to him today.

This said, the book is a treasury of the writings of Australian republicans. For most of the history of our country they were a minority, even a tiny minority. But that does not mean that they should be dismissed. Martin Luther, who nailed his protest on the door of a church, stood up against the power of organised Christendom for what he believed. Although he had

other unlovely characteristics, this was his noblest virtue. So it is with the republican Australians in the times of monarchy whose sentiments Mr McKenna has searched out and recorded. So long as the reader keeps a sense of proportion up to the last pages and realises how few were the republican protesters in Australia for most of its modern existence, the book will be an important contribution to the republican debate.

In the end, Dunmore Lang, and not Parkes, may win this argument. But the princely statue atop the hospital in Sydney should remain as a record of an undoubted period of our nation's story. Furthermore, I think I detected on the royal statue's visage a smile. If the republican system that is bequeathed to us is the "minimalist" one, it will be that of a constitutional monarchy but without the monarch. In that way, the royal tradition of the British Crown may yet have the last laugh on Australia's republicans should the people of Australia decide to move from a republican monarchy to nothing more than a monarchical republic.