

Australia's Christian Heritage: The Untold Story
Address to the NAACL, Old Parliament House
26 November 2005

Introduction

The story of Australia's Christian heritage is a great story which keeps never being told. It is a never-told story made up of thousands of untold stories. They are untold largely because they are unknown.

Within the last two decades a lot of research has been done on the role of the Christian faith and the Judaeo-Christian ethic in the formation of the Australian nation, our civic and business institutions and our moral and cultural values. This research has uncovered many inspiring stories which should be told. These stories add up to the big story.

But the big story keeps never being told because our historians, those stewards of our collective memory, do not expect to find such inspiring stories and therefore do not go looking for them. The stereotype is that Australia is not a religious country. It is a secular country and religion has not been important:

T. Inglis Moore: Australian society has always been 'fundamentally irreligious, loosely pagan';

Russel Ward said that part of the Australian stereotype is an aversion to religion - The 'typical Australian' is a 'hard case', 'sceptical about the value of religion';

Manning Clark characterises Australia as 'The Kingdom of nothingness'.

Why have our historians not told us more of the Christian story? In the early 1990s a survey was conducted of the religious convictions of Australia's professional, academic historians, that is those who taught history in our universities. The results were amazing. 48% of our historians identified themselves as agnostics and 12% as atheists. So 60% of the history profession were then atheistic or agnostic – this is way in excess of the percentage of Australians (12% overall) who then identified themselves in that way.

Now this is one big problem, not for Christians, but for Australia. For most communities in most of history, religion is the social glue and the key to meaning. So, if it is true that Australia has no Christian past, then Australia has a future without unity or direction.

Novelist, Kate Grenville, has written that: ‘Australian History . . . is . . . full of all those incredible stories that nobody’s told’¹ Well, let us look at a few of the incredible untold Christian stories which make up the great story of Australia’s Christian heritage.

1. Isabella Parry and the nurture of children.

Early in 1830, after a fifteen-hour sea voyage from Sydney, Isabella Parry disembarked at Tahlee, Port Stephens, north of Newcastle in the Hunter Valley. She was accompanied by her husband, Sir William Edward Parry, the polar explorer. He was taking up his appointment as superintendent of the holdings of the Australian Agricultural Company which had been granted a million acres in NSW. They were also accompanied by their twin children, Isabella and Edward. They were named *after* their parents. But they were not named *by* their parents. And thereby hangs one of those incredible stories.

The twins were just two months old when they all landed at Port Stephens. They had been born in government house in Sydney, moments after the Parrys had arrived in Port Jackson. Ralph Darling, after whom Darling Harbour is named, was then governor. The babies were premature and very poorly. Isabella herself was in danger for her life. She had already lost two children in infancy, and a third had miscarried.

Eliza Darling, the governor’s wife, had the twins baptised immediately, naming them after their parents. So, little Isabella and Edward were named by the governor’s wife, not by their parents. Incredibly, Eliza Darling, even suckled little Edward at her own breast. This surely was taking nurturing to incredible lengths. Why did she not just put him to the breast of some convict midwife? Isabella later learned by experience why Mrs Darling had looked after her little Edward in that way. She herself went through seven convict wet nurses and found that they all drank too much, which, she came to believe, curdled breast milk.

That may or may not have been true, but two consequences are undoubtedly true. First, drunk midwives are in the habit of dropping babies. Second, our story is an example of how committed Christian women – and most of the untold parts of the Australian Christian story are stories about women – have cared passionately about how children should be nurtured and raised.

Both Eliza Darling and Isabella Parry were devout evangelical Christian women. Eliza² engaged in a whirlwind of philanthropic activities, but the

¹ *Bulletin* 12 July 2005, p.88.

² Anita Selzer, *Governor’s Wives in Colonial Australia*, National Library of Australia, 2002.

reality of her lot may be seen from the fact that she conducted these activities mainly from her sofa, as she was always pregnant.³

Isabella, too, was a Christian, a saint strong in heart and clear in mind. Her desire was to serve God. She believed she could best do that by attending to 'the one thing needful' (Luke 10.42). This verse of scripture meant doing whatever was required to ensure the salvation of those for whom one was responsible. In Isabella's case, this meant her family, herself, and the employees or 'servants' of the Company, the assigned convicts, and the aborigines.

Because she could not find a suitable teacher, she decided to teach her own children. She invented home schooling as many Christian women have done throughout the ages when the alternatives jeopardise the eternal future of their children. She had another two children, Lucy and Charles, in quick succession. She thought of her children as 'immortal souls, entrusted to our care'.

But for Isabella, while charity may have begun at home, it did not end there. Her husband ran the local church, while she opened a school for 42 young pupils and another for adult convicts, and she established a lending library. She visited the sick and concerned herself, as her admiring husband recorded, with the temporal and the spiritual well-being of all around her.

In an all-too-rare experience, she successfully befriended the aboriginal people in a nearby camp. She quickly came to realise that they were 'very harmless, quiet people'. She especially loved the Aboriginal children and expressed some concern that she was getting too used to their nakedness and delighted to see the 'small black things, running about like little imps'. She found the aborigines far less trouble than the employees and assigned convicts.

Isabella's story also has an ingredient found in all the best stories, namely romance. She was actually very much in love with her tall, handsome husband. She missed him profoundly when he was away, as he frequently was, and she became very excited at the prospect of his imminent return. The two of them, even when separated, read the Bible and prayed at the same time each day, so that they would feel their oneness in the Lord.

After the family had returned to England in 1837, Isabella suffered much more there than she did in New South Wales. The Parrys' eldest daughter, Isabella, died of scarlet fever. Isabella had another daughter who died, and then she herself died in 1839, aged 38, having another set of twins. Her eldest son, Edward, only nine years of age, was present when she died. His

³ Janet West, *Daughters of Freedom*, Albatross, Sutherland, 1997, 64.

father had read to her the scripture, 'Looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith', Isabella said 'and the finisher'. He never forgot his father's grief which he either would not or could not hide.

Young Edward was later to become Bishop of Bathurst, the first Australian-born bishop. He reflected that the Tahlee years had been spiritually successful. They had found it a wilderness, he believed, and left it a land of hope and promise.

Isabella's incredible story is incredibly instructive. She was privileged, but her sufferings showed that even the privileged among women suffered in those days, and of course still do, in the processes of childbirth and child rearing. The domestic scene is not a bed of roses, but it is the chief theatre of salvation. The family will always be the first concern of Christians.

It is significant that it is also the first concern of most Australians. More often than not, Christian values are Australian values because Australia is such a Christianised nation. It may not be a Christian nation, but it is certainly highly Christianised in its values. When we Christians seek to strengthen family life, we seek something incredibly precious to our fellow Australians.

But if both sides of politics would like to be seen as best for the family, let us turn to areas about which both sides are nervous – our indigenous people and culture. Charles La Trobe was a champion of both.

2. Charles La Trobe and the protection of the weak

Charles Joseph La Trobe was the first governor of Victoria. He was a man of deep Christian convictions. Both his father and grandfather were personal friends of John Newton and William Wilberforce and both were clergymen in the Moravian church, then the most missionary-minded of all the Protestant churches. La Trobe himself had trained for the Moravian ministry, was himself personally involved in the abolition of slavery, and was fully aware of the havoc which colonisation was wreaking on indigenous peoples all over the world.

In the same year as La Trobe was appointed superintendent of the new settlement at Port Phillip, 1839, Charles Darwin published his journal of his voyage on HMS *Beagle*. In it Darwin observed that, looking to 'the wide extent of the Americas, Polynesia, the Cape of Good Hope, and Australia', 'some mysterious agency' was causing the rapid suppression of the native populations. 'The varieties of man', he observed famously, 'seem to act on each other in the same way as different species of animals – the stronger

always extirpating the weaker.’⁴ This theory of the survival of the fittest became for many colonists justification for ridding the land of indigenous peoples as quickly as possible.

So La Trobe had a very tough assignment. The pioneer settlers of Victoria were on the make. They did not want to live in their humble shacks for long. They wanted to get rich quick. They wanted the colonial government to build the infrastructure of roads, bridges and wharves quickly so that they could get their produce to market. They also wanted to be granted lots of land so that they could make lots of money. That meant dispossessing the aboriginal people.

Imagine their horror when La Trobe arrived as superintendent of the infant colony of Port Phillip and declared that he had different priorities: ‘It is not by individual aggrandisement, by the possession of numerous flocks or herds, or by costly acres, that the people shall secure for the country enduring prosperity and happiness, but by the acquisition and maintenance of sound religious and moral institutions without which no country can become truly great.’⁵

They grumbled about his ineptitude, but their grumblings were chronically self-serving. It was he who had to come to their aid when their greed for land had caused the speculative boom to burst as early as 1841.

La Trobe did have some powerful backers in high places. He was appointed at the high noon of evangelical Christian influence on colonial affairs. The slave trade had just been abolished and the Aboriginal protectorates were established in 1838 to protect native peoples all over the Empire. Lord Glenelg, Secretary of State for the Colonies, insisted that Governor Gipps in NSW and Superintendent La Trobe in Victoria, protect the aboriginal people even if that did antagonise the squatters.⁶

So when he arrived at Port Phillip in 1839, one of La Trobe’s first priorities was the aboriginal people. He was besieged by settlers to be allowed access to the lands which had been set aside by Aboriginal missions. Encouraged by Alexander Thomson, a devout Presbyterian pastoralist who had settled in Geelong, La Trobe invited the Moravians to send missionaries to work among the aborigines. The Moravians, he believed, were different, with a reputation for persevering in the most difficult of mission fields. He granted them 25,000

⁴ Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle round the World under Captain Fitz Roy, R.N.*, first published 1839, 1860 edition, republished by the Folio Society, London, 2003, p.434.

⁵ ADB

⁶ H. N. Nelson, ‘The Missionaries and the Aborigines in the Port Phillip District’, *Historical Studies*, 12.45, 1965, 57-67, 59

acres of land remote from Melbourne and from settlers at Lake Boga near Swan Hill in north-west Victoria. The Moravian missionaries started well, and eventually achieved the only success which any missions to Aboriginal people achieved in the nineteenth century.

We are of course entering into a very contested subject in Australian history. It was a contested area in La Trobe's day. The anti-missionary lobby was vocal and strong. Interestingly, Darwin sided with the missionaries. On the basis of his visits to Tahiti and New Zealand, before landing in Australia, Darwin had concluded that the gospel was the only power which could elevate the native peoples above the degradation which now confronted them, and that even though they had to put up with appalling Puritanism as Sabbatarianism and prohibition, they seemed to be happy, even merry, in their new way of life.

Humanly speaking, in Victoria La Trobe and the Moravian missionaries faced an impossible challenge, and with the gold rushes, things only got worse for indigenous people. The miners proved as greedy as the settlers for their lands and their women, and terrified the blacks with stories about the cannibalistic intentions of the missionaries which the blacks had little reason not to credit.⁷

Today the contest continues. In the history wars, the black arm band group of historians have been accused of exaggerating the sufferings of Australia's aboriginal people. But, as Christians, we are not at liberty to follow popular ideologies such as social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest or the winning side in political power plays.

Truth will be essential to the Christian historian, but so too, if we want to be at one with Jesus, will compassion for the needy, the marginalised and the dispossessed (Matthew 25). Our aboriginal brethren may not have been as needy as the most committed of the black arm brigade have argued, but they were far more needy than any of us would ever want to be.

La Trobe was not only a champion of the indigenous people. He was also a pain to the colonists in that he was a champion of culture, and he was something of a poet, artist and musician. He insisted on the provision of parkland in the plan of Melbourne.

At considerable personal expense, this 'cultural virtuoso'⁸ gave every encouragement to the development of churches, and charitable, cultural and

⁷ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*, Albatross, Sydney, 1990, pp.159-63

⁸ Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia, 1788-1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973, 2.

educational institutions. And on Christmas Eve 1853 he had the satisfaction of hearing the Melbourne Philharmonic choral society give its first performance, a rendition of Handel's 'Messiah'.

Among its choir members, and this is why I am telling you this story, was David Mitchell, and he was the father of Australia's and perhaps the world's most celebrated soprano, Dame Nellie Melba. It is an indication of the surprising impact of Christianity that we would probably never have heard of her apart from the impact of Christianity. Because La Trobe allowed his administration to be fashioned on Christian values, Nellie Melba's father was able to express that talent which was to rise to such a great height in his daughter. Australia's Christian heritage moves in mysterious ways, as the hymn nearly says.

It was an extraordinarily difficult task to keep order in an infant society without infrastructure suddenly invaded by an exploding, extremely heterogeneous population, many of whom were quite prepared to employ criminal means to obtain what they could not easily acquire through toil. In such a context, it is perhaps the lot of statesmen of Christian character to be the one whom people need rather than want. La Trobe's Christian values not only gave this timid man courage, but they also gave him direction.

Part of the story of Australia's Christian heritage is that we have had governors and politicians who have provided a third way between the aspirations of settlers and the desires of the colonial office, between the prejudices of squatters and miners and the terror of their aboriginal victims. The political task of reaching compromise between competing interests has been the ideal theatre in which the Christian drama of bridge building and reconciliation has been played out.

3. William Guthrie Spence (1846-1926) and the improvement in conditions of employment and work

Now let's have a look at the most controversial issue in Australia today – Industrial Relations reform. What light can Australia's Christian heritage throw on that issue?

It is significant that the most vocal supporters of the Labor Party and the Trade Unions in their fight against IR reform have been the Christian churches. A fact little appreciated even by the Labor Party itself and the Trade Unions is the debt both owe to Australia's Christian heritage. The founders of Trade unions and the Labor Party in Australia, for the most part, were not atheistic Marxists, as the stereotype goes, but Christians, and not Catholic Christians, as another stereotype has it, but the branch of Protestantism in which John Howard was raised, namely Methodists.

While it is true that the IR legislation seeks to minimise the abuse of union power, standover tactics, inflexible workplace agreements, and unreasonable loadings, it is also true that it threatens to do away with over a century of gains for working people, and many of those gains were achieved by committed Christians who believed that they were acting in a way consistent with the teachings of Jesus.

Perhaps the greatest union organizer in Australian history, William Guthrie Spence, was both a Methodist preacher and a Presbyterian elder. The suburb of Spence here in Canberra is named after him. In 2003 the head office of the AWU in Melbourne was also named after him. He was, said AWU secretary, Bill Shorten, the founding father of the AWU. But there is typically no mention in his speech of Spence's Christian convictions and values.

But the labour movement would have been a very different thing without Spence's Christian heritage. He was born in 1846 in the Orkney Islands. Why are so many trade unionists Scots? Spence was the grandson of a noted Presbyterian minister in Scotland and his parents were staunch Presbyterians. His mother taught her two sons to read from the Bible before they were six, and Spence later became and remained throughout his life an elder in the Presbyterian Church.

He came to Australia with his family in 1852, settling first at Geelong and later, in 1853, at Spring Hill near Creswick, Victoria. As a small boy, he observed the Eureka uprising in 1854 and later claimed that it had a profound impact on his mature thought. Largely self-taught, he became widely read in the Bible, the classics, political ideas, and economics, and he made a close study of the lives of both Jesus and St. Paul.

Beginning as a shepherd, in his youth he also worked as a butcher-boy, a shearer, and a miner.

- 1874, in the Clunes district, he initiated a trade union that was part of the process of the formation at Bendigo in the same year of the Amalgamated Miners' Association of Victoria.
- From 1882 to 1891 Spence was general secretary of the AMA and under his leadership, the union was 'moderate and conciliatory but firm on fundamentals.'⁹ A genius in his organizing and negotiating skills, Spence wanted one grand union that would cover all kinds of miners in Australia and New Zealand,
- and from 1884, several unions, including New South Wales coalminers, affiliated loosely to become the AMA of Australasia.

⁹ Geoffrey Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, Melbourne, 1971, 112.

- His growing reputation as an industrial organizer led to his appointment in 1886 as foundation president of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union of Australasia.
- Spence is, of course, best known among labor historians for his failed leadership in the 1890 Maritime Strike in New South Wales. The failed strike is of immense importance in the history of the labour movement. It convinced the trades unions of the need for a parliamentary labor party if they were ever to compete on equal terms in the future with the country's moneyed interests.
- Spence continued to be active in the labor movement and increasingly in labor politics following the 1890 strike. He was general secretary of the Australian Workers Union from 1894 to 1917.
- Elected as a Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly from 1898 to 1901,
- he later served in the federal House of Representatives from 1901 to 1919.

In the years before his union organizing took him on the road for much of the time, Spence served as secretary and Sunday School superintendent of the Creswick Presbyterian Church. In the 1880s, while he was achieving fame as a union organizer, he became a 'local preacher' for the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, two branches of Methodism, which were to amalgamate with the Wesleyan Methodists in 1901. He frequently served as an evangelist in Primitive Methodist and/or Bible Christian churches. He was a teetotaler and a leader in the temperance movement.¹⁰

In his unexcelled concern for the working people of Australia, he always maintained that he was doing what Jesus would have him do for the downtrodden of society. Presbyterians, Primitive Methodists, and Bible Christians of the period all stressed that the Gospel should be applied to the whole of life, that redemption through Jesus Christ brought with it a changed life that worked itself out in both personal piety and social awareness.

He constantly argued that the labour movement must be based on the values of Jesus. He wrote in 1892: 'New Unionism was simply the teachings of that greatest of all social reformers, Him of Nazareth, whom all must revere'.¹¹ On June 12, 1892, in a speech entitled 'The Ethics of New Unionism', Spence told a roaring crowd of several thousand labour supporters: In taking up this new unionism, we must see if we cannot get back to the level of the founder of

¹⁰ Coral Lansbury, 'William Guthrie Spence,' *Labour History*, no. 13, 1967.)

¹¹ *The Worker*, June 4, 1892

Christianity, imbibe some of His spirit and get rid of musty theology, for some of it is very musty. (Laughter and cheers.)¹²

Spence was a very *Christian* socialist. That is, he was a gradualist, always stressing a preference for negotiations and conciliation over confrontation and class conflict. In 1891 he declared that strikes are 'barbarous': "I do not believe in strikes at all". While he obviously believed that working people had to organise or they would be exploited, he believed, with the framers of today's IR legislation, that negotiation, not force is the best way forward. He hoped that the capitalists would come to the unionists and say, 'We will go mates on this or that concern'".

Spence is unintelligible without an understanding of his Christian values. So too is the Labor Party. The Labor Party must recover its own Christian heritage if it is to have any future. Kevin Rudd and Kim Beazley are among those who appear to have accepted that fact.

4. Bob Mellows and the impact of Jesus's values on safety in the Coal Industry

Australia's Christian heritage does pop up in the most surprising places, until you reflect that it is not really so surprising given that Australia, while not a Christian country, is such a Christianised country.

Having taught at Wollongong University I became interested in coal mining and I wrote a history of Australia's worst mine disaster, that at Mt Kembla on 31 July 1902. I did a lot of reading on the culture of safety in dangerous industries and I saw how very difficult it was to change the culture of safety in these places.

Imagine my astonishment, therefore, when I read about a mine where a dramatic increase in safety was achieved and it had everything to do with the spiritual capital of the Christian faith.

At the Cornwall coal mine in the Fingal Valley of Tasmania, between 1980 and 1990 there were about 200 accidents reported each year, and the company paid between \$50,000 and \$250,000 per annum in compensation.

Then in 1991/92 the accident rate started to dip dramatically, so that by 1993 it was practically zero and it has remained near zero. The value of compensation fell to almost zero. So how did it happen? Did the mine close in 1993? No. A Christian mine manager, Bob Mellows, saw that safety was best regulated not by the law of the land, but by the law of Love. He made a study of the practical meaning of the word love in the New Testament and shared

¹² *The Ethics of the New Unionism*, Sydney, 1892, p. 8

his findings with the miners. He spoke to his men about how different the workplace would be if they treated each other in a way consistent with the teachings of Jesus. If they were humble and owned up to their mistakes and took responsibility for them and for each other, if they cared for one another, and put the interests of others ahead of their own.

In a report to the '98 Coal Operator's Conference, he said: 'It is not because of legalism that Jesus Christ told us to love God and love one another. It was because he knew it was essential to our well being in all aspects of life'. He went on to say that 'The Foundation of Safety is loving one another (and ourselves). This is not merely an emotional condition. It is a choice of behaviour and the only basis for a satisfactory relationship.' The Cornwall Mine's safety improved, Mellows concluded, when a breakthrough in relationships occurred, when barriers were removed, trust developed, and self esteem achieved, and this breakthrough occurs whenever communities resolve to live by the values of Jesus.

Conclusion

So there are 4 little stories about the strong influence of the Christian faith on such areas as

- the nurture of our children,
- the protection of our indigenous people,
- the fostering of culture,
- the improvement in the conditions of employment and work, and
- improved safety in the workplace.

I am sure that 10,000 such stories could be told. And thanks to the research of recent years, not as many of those stories are as unknown as they used to be. Next year, on 6 and 7 August, we are proposing to hold in the new Parliament House a National Forum on Australia's Christian Heritage. It will be an opportunity to tell some of those stories. The aim of the National Forum is

- To report on research on the Christian contribution to the development of Australia, its culture, professions, and institutions
- To identify the distinctive values of Jesus involved in this contribution and explore their significance for future generations of Australians

The National Forum will

- review the considerable contribution of Christianity to the shaping of our culture, education and the arts, of our government and legal system, of business and the professions, and of our health and welfare systems. It will also
- show that the values of Jesus have shaped decisively much that is best in our great democracy; and it will
- show that Christianity has consistently acted as third way, a force for reconciliation and mediation between the conflicting factions in Australia's history: between capital and labour; black and white; women and men, war and peace which most historians have thought to have fashioned our history.

Australia's Christian heritage then is actually surprisingly strong. The spiritual capital arising from that heritage strengthens our homes and our workplaces, our educational institutions and our culture, our civic institutions and our caring agencies.

But it is not nearly as well known as it should be. Our historians have been tone deaf to Christian music. It's time to make it better known. Between now and the National Forum next year, we would appreciate your prayers and your good and wise counsel and advice as we work out what we should say and what we should emphasise to ensure that the values of Jesus continue to shape and transform our national life.