

Richard Mahony and scientific hubris

John McLaren

In the year of the 150th anniversary of the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition, it is appropriate that we should consider the role of scientific hubris in the history of Melbourne. The expedition, the Victorian Exploring Expedition, was sponsored by the Royal Society of Victoria, which had been established in 1854 as the Philosophical Society of Victoria and received its royal charter in 1859. Manning Clark describes the member of its exploration committee as men with supreme confidence “that the progress in communication, in transport, I hunting equipment, in direction-finders, food preservation and water-divining would protect men from all the perils of the Australian desert ... The time was ripe to for man to establish his mastery over the earth in Australia.” (145) They conceived the expedition as conceived as a major scientific enterprise, and no fewer than seven individual sciences were specified in the official instructions. The expedition was at the same time a major imperial enterprise, intending to bring any wealth discovered in Australia’s interior under the control of the Victorian government. Burke, however, was an adventurer, and possibly the worst leader who could have been chosen either to follow scientific instructions or to approach the country in an attitude of scientific curiosity. The deaths of three of the four men who made the final dash across the deserts may be attributed to his failure to learn anything from the Aborigines who lived relatively comfortably in the area, particularly in a good season like 1860-61.

At first glance, the historical Robert O’Hara Burke appears as the antithesis of the fictitious Richard Mahony. Burke is the man of action; Mahony is the dreamer. Yet each is driven by the ambition to conquer the unknown, and in each man this ambition breeds the self-confidence that blinds them to the reality of other people and even of the physical environment. Their refusal to recognize the other of either humans or the land brings each of them to destruction. Further, just as Mahony is a fiction constructed by the author from the story

of her own father, so the Burke of the public imagination is a legend built on a history. Each has become a symbol of Victorian self-confidence brought undone by hubris.

There is no doubt that the Burke and Wills expedition has attained legendary status in the Australian imagination. A Google search for Burke yields 456 000 entries, compared with 138 000 for his great rival, John McDouall Stuart, 32 700 for Ludwig Leichardt. 138 000 for Edward John Eyre, perhaps the most successful of them all. Charles Sturt scores a massive 787 000, but if the search is qualified with the word 'explorer' this is reduced to 11 400, compare to Burke's, similarly qualified, 148 000. The NLA Catalogue records 84 books that have Burke as subject, compared with 60 for Sturt and a mere 27 for Stuart. Searches using their expeditions yields much more positive results for Stuart, probably reflecting the existence of a society dedicated to his cause.

In his *History*, Manning Clark dramatizes both Burke and Stuart as driven men and tragic heroes. Stuart he describes as a man "sustained by that vision of glory that had lived in Sturt. He had the fierce pride of a man who stood apart from his fellows. At other times he was so overwhelmed by the desire for strong drink that not even the spirits in his instruments were safe in his presence ... He was an extravagant man, an exaggerator, whose face was said to light up whenever he got within five hundred miles of a public house." (145). He finds similar demons at work in Burke. His first mention of him, as police officer at Beechworth, is as "a man with a quelling look in the eye, and a secret sharer of that madness inside the men who had driven the Chinese down that lovely valley." (116) Being Clark, he declares without much evidence that "Like his illustrious predecessors he had that private ache in the heart driving him to seek glory." He is on more solid ground when he notes the qualities that Burke shared with Mahony: he "had a personality which would not tolerate the questioning of his decisions, and a tendency to lapse into savage rages with those who doubted his wisdom ...". He also accurately identifies him as an instrument of Empire who "never doubted that providence had chosen the British to go out into the wilderness and subdue it ...". This contributed to Burke's tragedy by blinding him to the possibility that the original inhabitants of the country might have been able to teach him how to survive by

living off the land. (146-47) Burke's blindness to the Aborigines was not shared by explorers like AW Howitot, but probably remained general until Baldwin Spencer joined the Horn expedition generation later, in 1894.

Clark portrait draws on a century's contributions to the development of the story. The Royal Society and the colonial press had first turned the scientific expedition into a great race, placing Burke and Stuart in contention to be the first to cross the Continent from south to north. (Moorehead, 47-48) The press attention to the fate of the expedition, the discovery and return of the survivor, John King, and the bodies of the leaders, the subsequent Royal Commission, commemorative paintings by William Strutt and John Longstaff, and the monumental statue by Charles Summers of Burke and Wills, where Burke enfolds Wills in his cloak while gazing like Moses at the Promised Land, established the legendary status of the expedition, (The statue was originally erected in 1865 at the intersection of Russell and Collins Streets, later moved to Spring Street, outside Parliament House, and now stands in the city square.) Frank Clune's racy account emphasised the incredible ill luck that dogged the expedition, as well as what he judges the unreliability and culpable negligence of the human actors. Clark draws attention to duality of the legend, with the establishment using it as an example of loyalty and courage, and the radicals seeing it as "further evidence of the imbecility of gentlemen." (164) Joseph Furphy belonged with the latter when, at the end of the century in his novel *Such Is Life* he has the bullock-driver Mosey Price tell the Englishman, Willoughby, that any drover or bullock-driver or stock-keeper, "from 'ere to 'ell", could have taken that expedition "straight through to the Gulf, an' back agen, an' never turned a hair." After a vivid description of Burke's militarist style, Mosey declares that he failed his purpose for want of his sherry and biscuits. (26)

In 1963 Alan Moorhead published his classic *Cooper's Creek*, a comprehensive and judicious account of both the Victorian Exploring Expedition and the events surrounding it. Moorehead says that the suggestion he write this book came first from Sidney Nolan, and his account shares with Nolan's Burke and Wills sequence of paintings a sense of the incongruity between the beauties of a vast but indifferent landscape and the visionary but grotesque appearance of the humans invading it. Moorhead's account gives the explorers a tragic status

which transcends both the heroism of the monuments, the pretension that provoked Furphy, and the human failures that annoyed Clune.

Moorehead, who like Clune had followed Burke's tracks, writes evocatively of the country at its best. Of their first campsite on the Cooper, he writes that "It was in many ways a beautiful place, with the water curving around, fairly thick trees to give them shade and an outlook across the creek to the green polygonum reeds and the belt of eucalypts on the other side. Birds of every kind teemed in thousands, and there were fish as well as mussels in the creek." (64) The description is poetical as well as practical, and the mention of the polygonum reed prepares the reader for the later recognition of its importance to their chances of survival. Yet he is equally aware of the resistance of the land to intruders. He has already described the terrible gibber plains they had had to cross on their way from Menindie. Later, he describes their wanderings after their return to the Cooper and discovery of Brahe's abandonment:

... from now on we must picture them walking very slowly, exploring the dry channels of the Cooper one after another and constantly turning back when all signs of water gave out; a concentrated little group, walking in Indian file through the silent gum-trees, pestered by the flies, not speaking very much ... They were aliens in this hard indifferent country, this gaol of interminable space ... (116)

Through this and similar passages, Moorhead locates the source of the tragedy not in human weakness or the incompatibility of the land with human ambition. As he put it himself, "Their story perfectly expresses the early settlers' deeply-felt idea that life was not so much a struggle against other men as against the wilderness." (200) The expedition, he concludes, was of minor importance, given its significance only by the deaths of its principals. But, as he follows the expedition's tracks, he notes the "ruthless and very haphazard" invasion of civilization that has succeeded them. "Some of the new towns ... have a bright suburban look, but at their outskirts there is sure to be a collection of iron shanties of appalling squalor ... But then ... the half-cast drover, whom yesterday you saw sprawling drunken in the pub, now rides by, with his mob of cattle, graceful, handsome and erect, absolutely in command of his world." And then, as he follows towards the Gulf, he finds creeks "with avenues of lovely ghost-gums and paperbarks, and ... bush turkeys and great elegant storks, and

cranes like the brolga and the jabiru.” (208) The human tragedy may have been succeeded by the black comedy of settlement, but nature remains as a reminder of the vanity of human attempts to conquer “the ghastly blank” that had first awoken the ambitions of the Royal Society and its Exploration Committee.

In literature, this economic and scientific hubris remained unchallenged until Henry Handel Richardson started work on *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Her hero Mahony is, like Burke, confident in his own abilities, to the neglect of the world around him, but he is also a fully-formed scientist. He also shares the fate that Moorehead ascribed to Burke, of being imprisoned by the gaol of the country. For Burke, the gaol is the country, but for Mahony it seems to be other people, but finally it is the country that defeats him.

When we first meet Richard Mahony, he is a storekeeper on the Ballarat goldfields, but we soon find he is a graduate in Medicine from the medical school at Edinburgh University. At the time this was possibly the most distinguished medical school in Great Britain. Mahony is forced to resume his profession when his wife is in childbirth and in danger of death from an incompetent charlatan. His conduct of her case contrasts science-based and traditional medical practice, and leads him to resume his profession. As a doctor, he takes great pride in maintaining his scientific standing by keeping up to date with the journals and through his own collecting and classifying of butterfly specimens. He extends these scientific interests to a methodical criticism of the Bible, which he finds wanting by rational standards. In all these ways, Mahony belongs to the society that was spawned by the goldfields, and which owed its prosperity to the subjugation of nature through reason. In the years of his prosperity he mixes in Melbourne with the same kind of social leaders as those who founded the Royal Society, and carries out his own scientific investigations of Biblical truth and of spiritualism, both matters of intellectual interest at the time.

Yet from its opening the novel has warned against such trust in human enterprise. In its prologue, a man is crushed to death when the shaft where he is working caves in. This is a metaphor for Mahony’s own journey through life. He starts with confidence, gathers material and intellectual wealth, only to be undone by hubris, a confidence in his own rational ability, which delivers him into the hands of a fraud. He is finally crushed by the economic collapse of the society he has been mining for its goods.

Mahony's journey leads him twice around the world and finally back to a colony whose best science cannot heal the failure of his mind. Like Burke's fatal expedition, this journey epitomises the destructive self-confidence of the new colony. His prosperity comes at first from his hard work as a doctor, which leads him to break up his home, turn his back on the colony and return to Britain, the home of the science that has brought him his fortune. But he finds that his old university has forgotten him and its science has moved on. Then his attempts to practise in Ireland and England fail because he is unable to adapt to old-fashioned social expectations. Then a fortunate speculation in gold shares frees him from the need to work, and he is able to return to Melbourne, which now appears to him as the home of freedom and progress. For a time he seems free of the world, able to return to Europe for the grand tour, but while there his fortunes collapse with a fall on the stock exchange as fatal to him as the collapse of the shaft had been to the miner in the Proem. He returns to Australia only to make one desperate move from a failing practice to another. His friends fail him, he abandons the scientific collections and intellectual aspirations that have sustained him. Finally the space and the heat of an inland town destroy him, and, after a failed attempt as government medical officer in Queenscliff, he is removed to a literal incarceration in Kew Mental Asylum. Finally, death frees him to a grave within sound of "what he had loved best on earth—the open sea." Only here does he find himself at home" "The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, awkward spirit." (990). His tragedy is, like Burke's, partly a product of his own temperament and the choices he made. But also, just as Burke was driven by an ambition to fill in the "ghastly blank" in the map, Mahony was driven by an urge to fill the blanks in his own knowledge. Burke wanted to dominate the continent, Mahony wanted to dominate ideas. Burke's scientifically equipped expedition and navigational technology were not sufficient to enable him to survive the Central Australian desert. Mahony's medical and scientific knowledge could not enable him to endure or his daughter to survive the fierce heat of Barambogie (Chiltern). Both became victims of the scientific imperialism of the Victorian age and colony.

In the course of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, the chemist Tangye gives him the bitter advice that "caelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare currunt : " those who rush across the ocean, change their skies,

not their minds.” Mahony’s later life bears out the truth of this judgement, but also apposite, although ironic, would be another line of Horace: “mihi res, non me rebus, subiungere conor.”¹ I may attempt to subjugate matters to me, not me to matters. Both Burke and Mahony shared this ambition with the scientists of their time, but in both cases their lives show that the ambition led to disaster.

John McLaren is Emeritus Professor in the Humanities at Victoria University, Melbourne.

¹ Horace, *Odes*, Epistles I, xi, 27; I, I, 19.