

ANNOTATED
BY PHILLIP
DEEAY

IAN Turner as historian

Turner's understanding of the historian's task had been formed by his studies at Melbourne of Max Crawford's scientific methodology. His immersion in Marxist theory deepened his consciousness of class and the material relations of production that shape history, and in particular determined the characteristics of the Australian working class. In certain ways he anticipates E.P. Thompson's magisterial study, The Making of the English Working Class, although he lacks the cultural density of this work. He certainly follows ~~the~~ the work of his mentor, Robin Gollan, Radical and Working Class Politics - a study of eastern Australia 1850-1910, which he describes as the story of the gradual emergence of an awareness, among the workers, of their separate identity as a class apart from other classes in Australian society. His paraphrase of Gollan's argument offers a prehistory of his own story and its thesis:

The growing antagonism between masters and men, the recognition of conflicting interests, burst into open class war with the maritime and shearers' strikes of 1890-94 ...

Defeat in these first great class struggles taught the unions - and especially the new unions - that reliance on the radical middle-class parties was not enough. An independent working-class party was needed, to ensure that the weight of the state came down on the side of the workers, and not against them. The Labor Party was formed.

Lacking any social theory or clearly defined objective, the Labor Party quickly fell into a pragmatic programme of demands largely taken from its radical predecessors. As it sought success at the polls by tempering its policy to the middle class vote, so it produced disillusion among its most fervent supporters, conflict between the industrial movement and the parliamentarians, and a further swing towards the theories of class war and socialism.

Turner's critics disagreed both with his conclusions and with the political assumptions underlying his work. O'Farrell's complaint was that Turner's prejudices led him to ignore some of the evidence and misrepresent the actors. However, critics and supporters alike agreed that the task of the historian was to find the truth. The left argued that earlier historians had failed because they ignored the view from below, the thoughts and actions of the masses; the right accepted the perspective of official documents and reports, and believed that attempts to go beyond them and represent a class finished in abstraction. The debates have resonance today as the protagonists of contending views of the past don black armbands and white headbands to take their place in the market-place of ideas. Each generation of historians, adopting perspectives its predecessors have ignored, finds evidence they have missed. But today's contestants recognise that the market-place itself has changed. Few offer a single truth, and most recognise that the documentary evidence itself is flawed, shaped as much by the constraints of its time as by the political, rhetorical or recording intentions of its authors. For Turner, history was an integral part of politics, a means of establishing truth as a necessary means to effective action. He did not record the failures of the labour movement merely as a testament to past heroes. Rather, he found in their tenacity a source of hope for the future, just as he found in their dogma a warning against the wilful blindness so often thwarted their hopes. By analysing their failures, he sought to show the reality of the labour movement and the Australian working class that must constrain all attempts at either revolution or reform. His acceptance of the Communist Party's ideological myopia had frustrated his years of working for the revolution. For the remainder of his life, he attempted to prevent the Labor Party's similarly rigid prejudices from frustrating its programs to reform capitalism.

Yet, despite the Marxist framework of his own writing, Turner did not believe that his was the sole approach to truth. In a review of the first volume of Manning Clark's A History of Australia, he commends the author for using the indefinite article in his title. "Clark," he writes approvingly, "does not believe that there is one history, whose truth only awaits its revelation, but that there are potentially as many histories as there are historians." He acclaims the work as

good history not because the facts are there and in their right order ... but because this is a book whose perspectives will force writers and students of Australian history to turn their eyes and their minds away from books and documents ... and onto their society and themselves. ... this book is an action which demands a response ..."

He recognises the difference between his way of writing history and Clark's, but without claiming that either holds the truth. He responds to Clark's vision of "men driven by faith and doubt, greed, pride and ambition, torn apart by their own contradictions, by the evil that is in every man ... So that, for the individual, history is tragedy; en masse, it is irony." His own life has been both tragic and ironic. A marriage begun in love has finished in bitterness; his revolutionary zeal has ended in the ashes of betrayal. Yet, like Clark, he holds fast to hope, both in love and in the possibility of a free and just society. He recognises Clark's work as

x
Gollan or Turner?
prefigures?

ideology
no source?

were all attempts at reforms constrained by this reality?
but this a bit of an overstatement by Turner?
(or is it by you?)

Patriotic

failures of heroes?

your view on Turner?

a history of why men acted as they did and how they were defeated; like all great history, it is rich with passion and compassion – more for the mighty than the humble, perhaps because the mighty were more articulate, perhaps because their fall was more spectacular. It is contradictory because Clark is contradictory, divided between Christ's redemption of the individual and Karl Marx's redemption of the collective man ...

This is good stuff, isn't it?

Turner had first encountered Clark at Melbourne University, when Clark was the ever-probing, ever-questioning tutor who believed passionately in Australia as the place to study human conflict and hope, and at the same time constantly sent his students back to the evidence, the documents. Now he had woven from the documents an epic tale whose dimensions matched the scale of the hope and failure that Turner had found in his own life to this stage. Clark identified the outside circumstances and self-contradictions that defeat the individual will. Turner had known this defeat in his own life and in the lives of the men whose lives he was now studying. But he found also a resolution to the conflict: implicit in Clark's vision of history:

what happens in history is not what anyone wills; rather, it is the 'innumerable intersecting forces, which give rise to one resultant – the historical event.' And, if this is so, then it is possible, while accepting an individual frustration and defeat, to talk of probable social progress – but not as an inevitable process; for progress does not turn out to mean what individual men expect it to mean, while in our day it carries close beneath the surface its own opposite, the "common ruin of the contending classes."

Through this conclusion Turner returns the social to Clark's conception, while allowing to the individual the hope of probable progress. For all this acceptance of tragedy, he remains a man of the Enlightenment, while Clark is haunted by the ghosts of Dostoyevsky and the failures of the imperial and scientific projects.

Yet Clark and Turner are united in their humanist assumptions that the experience of the individual is the ultimate measure of value. However much he – for their subjects are usually men – may be shaped by society, and his actions contained and frustrated by economic and social factors outside his control, the individual remains responsible for his actions and his choices. He may never have full knowledge, but he can have true knowledge, and is morally bound to act accordingly for the good of the whole community. Both writers accept Marx's dictum that man makes history, although he does not choose the circumstances in which he makes it. They both knew that the path to hope runs between the Charybdis of despair and the Scylla of overweening pride. Despair is the lot of those who bow entirely to circumstance. Others, who recognise the power of circumstance while still trying to influence it, risk yielding their ideals to the pursuit of power. Those who attempt to ignore circumstance separate themselves from society, finishing in isolation or sectarian irrelevance. Those who try to make fit their own will or ideology become tyrants. Both Clark and Turner in their histories trace the lives of men and occasional women who challenge circumstance only to be defeated by it. Both ~~men~~ write histories that reveal the struggle between the individual and contingency, structural and circumstantial, and demand of their readers that they decide for themselves where they stand. They find in history an enigma and a challenge, but never an alibi. Clark emphasises the individual tragedy, while Turner finds social hope in the persistence of the challenge, even by those who isolated themselves in sects where they themselves became both tyrants and tragic heroes, resisting the more constant betrayals of those who surrendered to the demands of circumstance.

This is excellent, John.

The social tragedy of Turner's career had been the betrayal of social hope, both by Stalin and by his followers in the Communist Party of Australia. His first book can be read as a continuing meditation on the sources of this betrayal in the earlier history of radical thought and action in Australia. Unlike Clark, he finds these sources not in the character of individual but in the economic and political structures of Australian society and the construction of its working class. Yet there is some truth in O'Farrell's comment that he concentrates on the movers and shakers of the labour movement, rather than on the perceptions of the workers themselves. Although he intends to show how the constraints put on its leaders by the rank and file the labour movement distinguish its leadership from other elites, his history hides the lives and experiences of the individual members of this rank and file by his construction of them as a mass or a class, albeit riven by its own differences and contradictions. This distancing corresponds with his own life, where he walks away from the failures of his own politics and marriage, seeking the circumstances that will enable him to construct a new life with history and with Ann. At this time he could face his deepest worries only in his mind and in correspondence with a few trusted friends. He would later learn how to write of common experience, but personal happiness would elude him almost to the end. This however in no way inhibited his sociability, or turned him aside from his lifelong quest to further social justice amid the realities of a turbulent and unjust world. His writing was one of his means to this end.

this very personal appeal
'jars' somewhat

ⁱ 'The Politics of Labor' Overland 19, December 1960, p. 39. Turner is reviewing both Gollan's work and Noel Ebbels's collection of documents, The Australian Labor Movement 1850-1907, and the thesis he paraphrases applies to both books. It is however argued in Gollan, where Ebbels leaves it implicit in the documents.

Ebbel (no')

ⁱⁱ 'Australia - beginning and an end', Overland 24, September 1962, p. 41.