The Democratic Moment

The immigrants assisted to New South Wales in the 1830s and 1840s were the motor of a democratic movement that despised the hierarchy of paternalism. Many had agitated for the English Reform Act of 1832 and against the Corn Laws and ‘the atrocious Penal Code’ in Ireland. Their associations, newspapers and street protests created a vibrant democratic culture that drew its strength from deep class resentment. It challenged the power relations of a ranked society and turned the streets of Sydney into a battleground for reform. To the Mutual Protection Association, the first organisation of working men in Australia, it was anathema that a worker be treated as ‘a creature of another class to be regulated and controlled’. To Governor Gipps, who spent the early 1840s negotiating with the unemployed, their appropriation of the printed word was the last straw: their paper The Guardian reported that he became ‘almost demoniacal in his rage’ because the workers had dared to ‘judge for themselves’ and express their ideas ‘through an organ of their own’. Under paternalism’s unwritten code self-assertion smacked of filial impiety.

The turbulence in Sydney was an episode in the bigger history of western democracy that reflected and shaped shifts in the workings of philanthropy. If philanthropy had its origins in the old order and was traditionally the work of the gentry, industrialisation and colonialism detached it from its moorings and it became part of the worldview of the new reforming middle class. Thus do we find, in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land in the late 1830s and 1840s, new philanthropic movements and individuals reflecting the radical edge of the times. In particular the drive for democracy gave social reform greater weight within the philanthropic vision. The anti-slavery movement had been the great social reform movement at the turn of the century. Now
colonial philanthropists pressured government in new ways: to provide fairer access to land, better organise immigration, stop the sale of grog and stop the killing of Indigenous people. The belief in social reform did not lessen the older commitment to moral reform – they were two sides of the same coin. The agitation to reform the English poor law in the early 1830s gave renewed impetus to fears of the morally degenerative influences of ‘pauperism’ and it was supported by the liberal commitment to individual responsibility. At the level of popular street politics moral concerns now intersected with a democratic disposition that challenged Tory power and complicated ideas of respectability. Against a background of long-term growth in consumerism and social conformity, driven individuals promoted forms of respectability that were tinged with anti-materialism, class indignation and sometimes gender outrage. They sought to enhance the autonomy of individuals to prevent them becoming objects of charity.

The main issues in the colonial struggle for democracy that bore on the workings of philanthropy were land and immigration. Workers wanted access to land and to control the flow of immigrants – especially convicts – who would flood the labour market and lower wages. Middle class democrats, however, were more inclined to look on controlled immigration as a philanthropic option that would provide the British poor with new opportunities for independence. The theories of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the ambitious and persuasive promoter of colonies, turned emigration into a national solution. He argued that the sale of ‘crown’ land should be used to finance emigration, which system was implemented in New South Wales after 1831 and adopted for a new settlement in South Australia in 1836.2 To the English Catholic Caroline Chisholm and the Scottish Presbyterian Rev J. D. Lang, colonisation was the answer to Britain’s grinding poverty. The ‘hungry forties’ were spectacularly desperate. Bad harvests and the Corn Laws kept the price of bread high. Famine struck the Scottish Highlands and Islands in 1836–7 and 1847–9; in Ireland the famine of 1845–9 was ‘a tragic ecological disaster of monstrous proportions’ in which two million people died. Emigration was seen as an ‘advantageous asylum’ – one which relieved landlords of their responsibilities: landlord inducement raised questions of coercion, particularly in the case of the ‘clearances’ of the Scottish Highlands.3

Some recognised that colonisation was entrenching the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples but the humanitarian movement that emerged to ease its passage does not have a strong record. The London-based Aborigines Protection Society was more concerned with South Africa and