

such as Parkes, Barton, Deakin and others there would certainly have been no union in 1901.

LESLIE ZINES\*

## II

### *Review by an Historian*

Some years ago three historians in Melbourne, J. A. La Nauze, A. W. Martin and G. Serle, formed an Editorial Advisory Board to publish scholarly writing upon Australian federation. There was a need for such work, because apart from the monumental Quick and Garran which appeared as long ago as 1901 and the work of Geoffrey Sawer, writing on federation tended to suffer either from over-modesty or extravagance. Historians, intimidated and bullied as they were and are by philosophers and poets who called in question the value of what they were doing, had yet another reason for keeping silent about the making of the Australian Constitution: writing on such a subject seemed to suggest a presumption of knowledge they knew they did not possess, in the fields of constitutional law and economics.

Besides, federation always was an emotional subject—and as such, tended to attract emotional language such as “the lion in the path” or the “federal conspiracy”. Perhaps that was why for a long time historians and publicists tended to get caught up in rather emotional or near-hysterical exchanges about the motives of the founding fathers—whether, for example, federation was a smoke-screen behind which the manufacturers of Melbourne created more favourable conditions for the marketing of their products; or whether a conservative plot to create constitutional barriers which would make it legally impossible to change Australian society—in particular to replace private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange by common ownership. There was also at times more than a hint that the truth about the making of the Australian Constitution was something which should not be exposed before the vulgar. Those who knew were like the initiates of a Greek mystery cult: they were not prepared to share their secrets with other workers in the world, though they were prepared to drop remarks such as “If only you knew what I know”. There were hints that one day the world would be told exactly what went on on the *Lucinda* at Broken Bay during the Sydney Convention of 1891.

The great merit of this work by La Nauze is that it rolls away the clouds that have obscured the sight of the field, and lets us see what actually happened. It begins with a useful summary of the early references to federation in Australia. Those who have dug around in the “colonial” period of our history, especially the period before 1850,

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might demur a little at what is left out in these two or three pages, but in the light of what is to come, such criticism would be rather heart-dimming. His story proper begins with the Melbourne Conference of 1890, the discussion of which sets the tone of the whole work. Others have written rather carelessly about the influence of the report of Major General Edwards on the summarizing of that Conference. By a display of the virtues of accurate scholarship, La Nauze sorts out the story for the first time.

On the membership, the debates, and the decisions of the Conference of 1890 and the Conventions of 1891 and 1897-8 he is meticulous, judicious, and authoritative. Indeed, that part of the work has been done so thoroughly that a layman in the field (such as the present reviewer) is left with the impression that there is little left for those who come after him. It can be said with confidence that whereas before the publication of this work anyone who wanted to know, why, for example, the word "Commonwealth" was used, why "God" got a mention in the preamble to the Constitution, why those words "absolutely free" got into a section of the Constitution, or why no bill of rights was written into the Constitution, might have had to do a lot of research of his own. From now on all he will need to do will be to look it up in La Nauze.

I imagine they will continue to look up La Nauze long after our society has shed the values and visions of the world which informed the writing of this book. For two things go on simultaneously in the work. One is the telling of the story in such a comprehensive way that one wonders whether that account will ever need to be changed. The other is the interventions or comments by the narrator on those events and the motives of the participants. On this latter point, at times one has the impression that men such as Parkes, Reid and Griffith, to mention but a few, are up for a University examination, and are being assessed in the language teachers sometimes use in writing comments on students' essays. It would be churlish to quarrel with the right of the author to pass such judgments, or, for that matter, to comment on who wins the prizes in the human lottery, and by those strange laws such things come to be. A book lives in part not just for its wealth of learning but for its "quantity of felt life". Again, there is no question that there is a great deal of "felt life" in the narration of this story about federation. The question that may be worth raising, not by way of criticism or rebuke or to expose an author's infirmities, but rather to see the window, as it were, opened on this vast world of federation—that question is precisely, through which window has the author looked at this section of the human scene? I suspect it is the window of the "Australian-Britons"—and a very magnificent window it is. But I suspect that succeeding generations will want to know why that partnership was not called in question in 1890-1900, and why British influence survived here and in New Zealand long after it had receded in other parts of the world. One can only hope that those who came after the "Australian-Britons" will have the sense not to discard all the creations of those who looked through that window on the world at large. Because in this

work by La Nauze they will be able to flavour what it was like to see the world through the eyes of men here who were steeped in Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill.

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