THE SENTIMENTAL NATION: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth

by John Hirst, Oxford, 2000. x + 388 (incl. index), ISBN 0 19 550620 0.
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Reviewer: A.W. Martin*

In 1949, Geoffrey Blainey, in a famous article taking up an equally celebrated piece, the political scientist Robert Parker's 'Australian Federation — the Influence of Economic Interests and Political Pressures', declared: 'Professor Parker has reopened a subject that has been a no-man's land in Australian history for almost a generation. It is a subject rich in contemporary materials but poor in secondary interpretation'. Blainey succeeded in casting doubt on many of the illustrations Parker had used in his argument, and elicited from Parker this general observation: 'I am far from suggesting that the only motive force in this movement was economic. . . . The so-called popular initiative is in fact an excellent illustration of the mixture of personal, group and institutional influences that constitute the political process'. He noted that 'arguments against union in the prescribed terms consisted almost entirely of hard-headed special economic pleading'. On the other hand, 'a very large part of the federalist case consisted of broad and rather vague generalisations about . . . consummating Australian nationhood.' The caveat goes some way towards meeting Hirst's repeated complaint about historians who have looked almost instinctively for economic explanations for much of the federal movement.

It is, incidentally, the fact that such has been as much as anything a generational quirk. Immediately after the war, in those years when serious and widespread new research was beginning in Australian history, and when returning servicemen and women happily flooded into the honours history schools of our universities, undergraduates came newly into contact with certain overseas classics, to wonder how far their central ideas might bear upon local problems. One such was Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, a book, its author tells us, originally published in 1913, 'during the tumult that accompanied the advent of the Progressive party' and then reissued with copyright renewed in 1935 and 1941. 'Though the timing and the circumstances were obviously different, the question was how far Australia's federation and its subsequent constitution, then being scrutinised in the new wave of interest in Australian history, lent themselves to examination using Beard's powerful analytic ideas. In my last undergraduate year at Sydney University in 1948, a class of 19 all wrote their final honours theses on some aspect of federation, mostly considered in the light of Beard's work. Our teacher, the late Professor John Ward, was our

* Dr Allan Martin died shortly after completing this review. Dr Martin was one of Australia's most eminent historians. In addition to major biographies of Sir Henry Parkes (Melbourne University Press, 1980) and Sir Robert Menzies (Melbourne University Press, 2 vols, 1992 and 1999), he also undertook significant studies of party developments, notably in *Parliament, Factions and Parties* (Melbourne University Press, 1966) with Peter Loveday, and, as co-editor with Loveday and R.S. Parker, *The Emergence of the Australian Party System* (Hale & Iremonger, 1978).

abettor; he too, then writing his *Earl Grey and the Australian Colonie*s was deeply absorbed in the problems of federation.

In one section of *The Sentimental Nation*, John Hirst shows how the jubilee of Federation in 1951 elicited no stirring accounts of what Federation had all been about and why, and explains this largely through changes in the population profile brought by post-war migration, through lethargy and through simple lack of interest.

But now for the centenary we have at least two volumes, Hirst's own and Helen Irving's *To Constitute a Nation*, which portray federation as something larger than a businessmen's or politicians' achievement, and in looking also, if not primarily, at social history, mark something of a 'coming of age' in writing on the subject. It is hard to gainsay Blainey's crystal gazing of fifty years ago, when he remarked that Parker had gone far 'in stirring interest in this vital event in recent Australian history', and predicted that 'the problem may be swept far down the river of criticism before it is safely raised to higher grounds'.

It is on 'higher grounds' now. The last decade has witnessed notable conferences and seminars which have given the scene, as it were, a local habitation and a name: we now know much more about who the footsoldiers of federation were and what the sentiments were that seem to have moved them. While shrewd in his response to politicians' practical moods and ambitions, and clear-eyed in his understanding of the economic arithmetic they and their followers instinctively used, Hirst's reading of their best speeches, and the verse with which 'poets' insistently flooded the country, is that the making of a nation was for most of them a sacred cause. It was feeling, rather than calculation, which created Australia so peacefully. That is the constant theme of this work, and the origin and meaning of its unusual title: The Sentimental Nation.

One of the book's great strengths is that it locates the federation movement so well: unconventionally, for example, in those ideas of patriotism and unification exemplified, in different ways, by Garibaldi and Mazzini; more customarily, in pride of Empire and paradoxical resentment at various reminders of colonial status. Like any good historian, Hirst quietly keeps us well aware of the passage of time. In the 1880s and 90s, for example, unconditional admiration of the old Queen is almost universal and republicanism confined to an unwashed fringe whom the Premier, Henry Parkes, himself once a radical enemy in New South Wales of the respectable and socially undemocratic, has no compunction in seeking now to strangle. As far as the politicians are concerned, indeed, Hirst is for the most part a clearminded guide. He is under few illusions about the differences between the young and the older Parkes; he is not taken in by the belief that the Deakin view of all things is THE view; he is good at rescuing George Reid from the calumnies of a century. In the last part of his story the seemingly polite conflict over the Constitution between Joseph Chamberlain and Australia's envoys, and the significance of that for each party and for imperial relations generally, is traced with more than one new twist.

Indeed, not least of the charms of this book is the refusal of its author to accept, without a quizzical question or two, received wisdom, even when carrying the weight of so respected a guru as the late John La Nauze. Thus, for example, he is uncomfortable about the so-called 'Hopetoun Blunder', and while not producing knockdown evidence to refute the primarily Deakinite view that the choice of Lyne for Australia's first prime minister was a blunder, Hirst asks a series of questions that set somewhat different parameters. Nor does he pull any of the punches which might leave us thinking of Deakin's deviousness in emasculating Lyne as another side to the 'holiness' of the cause he (Deakin) saw federation to be.

And I must personally admit that as one always sceptical of the popular vision of Parkes as a, if not the, 'Father' of federation and subsequently of importance in the story I am close to being converted by Hirst! The stress on sentiment' allows considerable weight to be laid on Parkes's skill as phrasemaker, even versifier what is at stake is his effect on other people, not necessarily his personal motivation. Hirst is well aware of the old man's deviousness, ambition and pathetic decline in the 1890s. But he also shows how Parkes's words could stir contemporaries; few of them — even Deakin, it seems — could quite understand what his magic was.

To an extent Parkes fits quite well into the story Hirst is telling — the story of the movement towards federation. That canvas is naturally different and in some ways more limited than, say, one focusing on Parkes or New South Wales *per se*. A good example of this difference is the discussion, on p. 87, of Parkes's passivity on federation in the later eighties: 'He waited four more years before he made his move. He would have to hurry to be the first prime minister, although he was far from being in decline. . . . He was confident that his timing was right and that he could carry his colony with him. He did not consult with, or even inform, his cabinet about his federal plans. He would play the hero's part and lead Australia to its destiny'. All of which, on the general level, is certainly true enough.

There is, however, another level of specialist understanding which wonders what was happening to Parkes in those years of federal quietude, and why he was so anxious not to tell his cabinet of his plans. At issue here was the transition of the dominant political mode in the colony from faction to party, with a leader becoming the servant, ideologically, of his followers, rather than their non-ideological dictator. The 'young Turks', as Hirst calls them, in Parkes's cabinet were more concerned about this matter than about federation. It is therefore not surprising that on the very evening of Parkes's conversation with Carrington about federation he should write to tell his daughter that he had 'very much changed of late in my views of human life and I have lost much of my former relish for Parliamentary work'. Federation was a diversionary issue, especially if Parkes could, in effect, line up other colonial leaders to dish his own restive followers, or even (and this was exemplified in his later attempts to woo old enemies) be the basis for a completely new party on which to ride again to power.

Hirst's book is neatly, indeed unusually, structured. The development of the federation movement is at its core but the story is told through the arrangement of chapters in two sections, 'Cause' ('Destiny, Identity, Barriers') and 'Movement' ('Confusion . . . Ways and Means' — ten chapters). The progression is maintained skilfully but at various times free discussion moves flexibly to defeat rigid time lines. A third section, 'Afterwards' (three chapters: 'Beginning, Forgetting, Legacies') allows the author to bring the subject beyond the successful referenda which formed the nation, almost (albeit sometimes in quirky ways) up to the present. The first of these chapters discusses the formation of the first federal ministry and the political history generally of the early Commonwealth. The second has a quite delightful and down-to earth account of the foundation celebrations, discusses the opening of the federal parliament in Melbourne, the coming of Canberra and 'celebrations' in 1951 and 1988.

'Legacies' talks about the Constitution, and the weaknesses of civic understanding in Australia. It ends on a note that can be thought sad or sour, according to one's predilections:

> The organisers of [today'sl celebrations are encouraging localities not to stage a pageant of progress, but to find out how federation was fought out in their area. They are assisting the publication of books on federation — like this one. They have run TV advertisements to inform Australians about their federation history. They began with Barton, not with his deeds in the federation campaign, but to introduce him to Australians as their first Prime Minister. What sort of country is it, the advertisement asked, that does not know the name of its first Prime Minister? The answer is a country that is not quickly going to place Barton and Deakin alongside its real heroes: Ned Kelly, Phar Lap, and Don Bradman — a bushranger, a horse and a cricketer.

The book is richly illustrated with photographs and cartoons; these catch with often uncanny aptness the mood of the times with which they deal. My only complaint is about a fault for which the publisher is more likely to be the blame than the author — the footnotes. My old-fashioned preference is for these to be at the foot of the page; but if that is *verboten* perhaps page number clues as well as chapters could be given at the head of each page of notes. I found the notes quite frustrating to handle, and, given Hirst's argument, they are very important. ▲