

A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W. K. Hancock

Jim Davidson

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Reviewed by Kosmas Tsokhas

In this thoroughly researched, skilfully argued and sensitively presented biography, Jim Davidson explores the private and public aspects of W. K. Hancock's life and work, which spanned the twentieth century, from his birth in 1898 to his death in the year of the 1988 bicentenary of Australia. Since 1988, a great deal has been written and said about Hancock. The history wars have encompassed his legacy, especially his *Australia* (1930), his analysis of the British world, his studies of war and peace, and his environmental history. Because of Hancock's international standing as a public intellectual, some have sought support for their conservative values by claiming that he was not an anti-imperialist, that he defended traditional British political and legal institutions, that he held mainstream religious beliefs. Others have found reformist and democratic elements in his writing and researching, which were incorporated in innovating and questioning approaches to imperialism and nationalism, to fascism and war, to economic progress and ecological crisis. Davidson has written a biography which has made it possible to reassess and to re-evaluate Hancock in terms of contemporary readings.

During childhood and youth, Hancock enjoyed rural walks and outback adventures. He was influenced by the Bible, the Greek-English lexicon and British literature. He attended the rather exclusive Melbourne Grammar School and Melbourne University. Davidson has reconstructed Hancock's time at both institutions as meticulously as the documentary sources allow. There is much fresh information about people and places, which is marshalled with rigour and erudition by Davidson, as he observes and comments on Hancock's transitions from Melbourne to universities at Oxford, Adelaide, Birmingham, London and Canberra, where he helped to found the Australian National University and where he implemented a research agenda, which included the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and the interdisciplinary wool seminar.

Quite correctly, Davidson emphasises that, for Hancock, Christian Anglicanism was adhered to as a civil religion which enhanced moral and social order. Hancock asked whether humans were inherently evil or perfectly virtuous. He turned to a mixture of biology, Biblical wisdom, historical evidence and Machiavellian realism. He concluded that humans were less than gods but more than naked apes.

Despite his Anglicanism, during some phases of his life Hancock contemplated a kind of metaphysical transcendence. He gave close attention to the tensions between scientific rationality, political calculation, spirituality and a philosophy of holism in his biography of Prime Minister J. C. Smuts of South Africa (1962, 1968). The Smuts biography juxtaposed multiple meanings. For example, it contained a basis for an indictment of Smuts over policies that maintained systematic racist disenfranchisement and exploitation. It also included an appreciation of the necessity of such policies for a politician who needed both British and Afrikaner support in order to rule in South Africa.

From time to time, Hancock regretted, that like many Australians of great promise and firm ambition, he had to go to Britain in order to make his career. A recurrent theme in the biography is the strain between 'country' and 'calling', which references the title of Hancock's autobiography and sums up the situation of Australians who found themselves both inside and outside a post-colonial discourse. This discourse framed Hancock's *Australia*, which has been regarded as the most insightful and substantial study of Australian history and society published before the 1960s. At least four themes in *Australia* are relevant to the history wars. First, Hancock assumed prior Aboriginal ownership when he referred to British colonization as the invasion of Australia. Second, he voiced a mixture of criticism and resignation towards the destruction of native forests by pastoralists and farmers. Third, he stressed the important role of public investment and state enterprise in economic development. Fourth, he outlined a trend towards a cultural feeling and psychological awareness of national difference and separateness from Britain.

In his 1944 inaugural address as Professor of Economic History at All Souls at Oxford, Hancock revealed the ambiguity inherent in a method which crossed disciplinary boundaries and avoided political orthodoxies. He said that he admired the Marxists because they brought economic causation to the fore and because they sought patterns in history, but he

had no time for their economic determinism. He had even less time for the economic rationalist assumptions of the neoclassical economists. He pointed out that Alfred Marshall, Lionel Robbins and Neville Hicks regarded economic history as little more than economic theory applied to the past. Just as the neoclassical economist studied inflation, wages or the balance of payments in the present, the economic historian was expected to merely apply the same techniques to the past. However, when economists tackled concrete historical problems or societies, they observed many factors and causes at work. As well as capital, labour and land, price movements and trade cycles, they considered the impact of legal institutions, religious beliefs, geographical features and political activities. At one level, economic theory was useful because it helped the economic historian to avoid mindless empiricism. At another level, the principal task of the economic historian was to single out and analyse the economic factors or causes. Of themselves, such factors and causes could not explain social stability or change.

Hancock's international reputation was established in the 1930s and 1940s by his multi-volume *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs* (1937, 1940, 1942) and his general editorship of the civil series of the British history of the Second World War, to which he contributed the volume on the war economy (1949). The *Survey* can be read as a scholarly alternative to Soviet theories of imperialism, or as an attempt to confront doctrines of imperial idealism and benevolence with political and economic facts. Such alternative interpretations are suggested when Davidson revisits and re-examines Hancock's motives and purposes. A real strength of the biography is due to the balanced and subtle location of Hancock's thinking, writing and reading within different social, political and cultural contexts.

An analytical approach underpinned Hancock's Keynesian critique of the imposition of reparations on Germany at the Paris Peace Conference, his exposition of the structural difficulties built into imperial preference by the Ottawa arrangements in 1932 and his prediction that the economic pressures caused by racial distortions to demographic trends, labour market restrictions and limited domestic demand would undermine apartheid in South Africa. Although Hancock was an analytical historian, classical Greek, dialectical German and political British philosophical thought had an impact on him. Moreover, some of the originality of his work was interwoven with the use of narrative devices. These included

paradoxes, ironies and language puzzles which took the form of semiotic deconstructions of words such as 'commonwealth' or 'imperialism'.

In the *Survey*, which is ably discussed by Davidson, Hancock probed and reviewed the interrelations between the global, the imperial, the national and the colonial with what he referred to as 'perspective', 'justice' and 'attachment'. It was Hancock who first outlined the main criticisms of Lenin's theory of imperialism which have been elaborated, detailed and debated by a number of Oxford and Cambridge economic historians. While the *Survey* did not address macroeconomic issues and made limited use of statistics, it provided a wide-ranging description of the role of capital investment and public borrowing, of trade in commodities and manufactured goods, of immigration flows and technology transfers and their negative effects on pre-capitalist social structures and modes of production in Africa and Asia.

Overall, Hancock's work demonstrated that even after the imperial protectionism of trade diversion was introduced in the 1930s, the British Empire did not have an integrated economic strategy or design that could order and encompass the varied and contradictory interests of its dominions and colonies. The British government and bureaucracy could not make a credible, comprehensive assessment of the economic costs and benefits of empire. British power was limited and British influence was dispersed because the empire was so extensive and diverse. For example, there was the political economy of an imperial nation which promoted free trade, while dominions like Australia imposed tariffs and subsidies to protect their manufacturing and agricultural industries. It was an empire in which dominions were governed by politicians, who could see little inconsistency in being Australian, South African, Canadian or New Zealand nationalists, while they professed loyalty to the ideals of the empire and the Crown.

Hancock claimed that the true test of the historian was the ability to relate economics to the dilemmas of high politics. Previous research on those in Westminster and Whitehall, who were trying to preserve and reform the empire, gave too much attention to the pursuit of or belief in the absolute effectiveness of political slogans, formal agreements and constitutional documents when compared with material conditions. On the one hand, he focused on the power-wielders who were active at those points where governments, bureaucracies and economic interests

intersected. What the governments of Britain and the dominions, the rulers of India and the administrations of colonies, mandates and protectorates thought, decided and implemented were the results of a complex interweaving of conflicts, initiatives and reactions between themselves and European, Ottoman and American politicians, economic bureaucrats, military strategists and business groups. On the other hand, imperialism aroused nationalist and separatist movements which required flexibility from the colonial power. Sometimes it was necessary to allow the gradual devolution of control and in other circumstances the full grant of independence was expedient.

Davidson records Hancock's travels in Italy where he researched the Risorgimento in Tuscany. He spent time in Germany where he was repulsed and enraged by Nazism and where his strong opposition to appeasement started to take shape. For Hancock, political moralising was dangerous and pacifist behaviour was optimistic when dealing with brutal and unscrupulous fascist dictators. While Hancock endorsed the way that enlightenment ideas of humanity, liberty and equality could find institutional form in the League of Nations or the United Nations, Davidson shows that he remained a practical idealist of a liberal reformist persuasion, who acknowledged the limitations of ethical standards and legalist principles when counted in the calculus of power.

According to Hancock, it was possible and necessary to find a balance between industrial development, urban expansion, population growth and natural biodiversity. While he was Professor of History in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University, Hancock pioneered environmental political economy in his study of the ecological history of the Monaro district and the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme. The environmental paradigm, which informed *Discovering Monaro (1972)*, "bridged scientific reasoning and aesthetic sensibility". For Hancock, there were general lessons to be learned from the struggle within the Snowy Mountains national park to preserve a sustainable equilibrium between ecological values and the engineering and commercial aims of the Snowy Mountains Authority.

Hancock's ideas, priorities and commitments shifted over time. Nevertheless, he considered that peace-making was as important as war-making. He understood that states would continue to use military force, although the nuclear arms race had introduced a fundamental change

because it had created the risk of unparalleled destruction. He found merit in nuclear disarmament and in a policy of armed neutrality for Australia. The ecological values in *Discovering Monaro* turned him into an environmental activist. His *Australia* continues to be cited and contested. His work on global imperialism remains a reference point for post-Leninist and post-colonial studies.

Capitalism and the Dialectic: The Uno-Sekine Approach to Marxian Political Economy

John R. Bell

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Reviewed by Anitra Nelson

Bell's *Capitalism and the Dialectic* offers a clear description and simple explanation of the Uno-Sekine interpretation and development of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, which makes it especially suitable for university students and Marxian reading groups. The structure of the book follows Marx's analysis of capital: the first part on circulation, the second on production and the third on distribution, while the fourth outlines historical developments, including arguments clustering around the well-entrenched demise of capitalism.

Bell was a founding member of the Thomas Sekine and Robert Albritton group at York University (Toronto), who refined the approach of Japanese Marxist Kozo Uno (1897–1977). This book on developing a dialectical theory of pure capitalism deftly incorporates work by Marx, Uno (especially his *Principles of Political Economy*, 1980, Sekine translation), Sekine (especially *The Dialectic of Capital*, 1984, and *Outline of a Dialectic of Capital*, 1999) and Albritton (especially *A Japanese Approach to Stages of Capitalist Development*, 1991).

Drawing out and buttressing Hegel's dialectical logic within Marx's *Capital* Volumes I–III and other major works, Uno sought to strengthen the laws/theories of value and relative surplus value. Evolving almost a