

Signs of the times

A review of

MARK HUTCHINSON, *IRON IN OUR BLOOD, A HISTORY OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN NSW, 1788-2001*

Ferguson Publications and the Centre for the Study of Australian
Christianity, Sydney 2001.

The highest praise that can possibly be bestowed upon the author and his book is that the story is so well and accurately told that it need never be written again.

This was the judgement of a different age and earlier generation of Presbyterians on the first major publication on the history of the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales (C.A. White, *The challenge of the years*, Agnus and Robertson, Sydney/London 1951, p. ix). Only fifty years later the statement would rank high in the category of famous last words. Added history since 1950 and other questions of a different culture called for more than what the new generation simply called a “compilation of parish histories and biographies” (Iron, xii).

Dr. Mark Hutchinson wrote this book as the Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity was commissioned by the PC in NSW. The title *Iron in our Blood* is derived from a moderatorial address to the General Assembly of Australia — quoted in *Australian Presbyterian Life*, August 1977, p. 6:

The Presbyterian Church is pronouncedly and pre-eminently a doctrinal church. It is these doctrines that have put iron in our blood. It is these doctrines for which we contend now.

As a “fiddler on the roof” with some theological tunes of his own (that do not necessarily disagree with a moderate evangelicalism of some sort, e.g. p. 249), Hutchinson observes the changing times of Presbyterian “Annatevka” in New South Wales.

The main differences between these two books would appear to be that the first one concentrates on facts about and for the church, whereas the second one interprets and explains, not necessarily theologically or ecclesiastically. Mr. White used thirteen periods with approximately five categories to describe developments between 1788

and 1950, whereas Dr. Hutchinson uses nine, with five different ones for the twentieth century.

Where the earlier history left one wondering how an exemplary and godly Scot such as Thomas Muir could end up in Australia as a convict (*The challenge of the years*, p. 1), it is refreshing to have some answers to the questions in more detail than was permitted by the conventions and understatements, if not nationalism, of an earlier generation (*Iron in our Blood*, p.4).

Summary

Hutchinson describes the first period (1788-1820, pp. 1-20) as the time when Scottish freemen and convicts adhered to their convictions in days of Anglo-Saxon domination. The second period, for a reason perhaps only known to the author, does not start with the arrival of the first minister and sacraments of the church with the Rev. John Dunmore Lang in 1823. Hutchinson prefers the following year for his new period, thus leaving a gap of four years (1824-1836, pp. 21-48). His main theme of Presbyterian endeavours to establish their right of State support perhaps justifies this strange move in the eyes of some. Others might fail to see the logic, especially if they are theologians. The natural obstinacy ascribed to the Scots is the theme of the next phase, and the Free Church struggles emerge (1837-1850, pp. 49-80).

The fourth period (1850-1880, pp. 81-140) covers the expansion of the church. It was the age of great institution building (p. 81) but also of the gradual disappearance of traditional prerequisites of traditional Presbyterian worship (p. 123). Events are evaluated sociologically rather than theologically, and this is especially obvious in this chapter. On the other hand, perhaps the church had become so much of an institution that it did no longer theologically evaluate itself in the light of Scripture and tradition. The next period (1880-1914, pp. 141-218) describes Presbyterians as “principled pragmatists” (p. 207), resulting in a firm place in colonial society and education. The sixth period deals with the shocks of the Great War and Depression, respectively (1914-1938, pp. 219-264). The “agreed ideology of the Church” as Hutchinson describes it, fractured and met the crisis of modernism.

Period seven deals with World War II and its aftermath (1939-1960, pp. 265-322). Reaching our times “the significance of the period 1960-90 can hardly be overestimated” (p. 324). Hutchinson calls this the period of the disappearing church (pp. 323-396). The crisis of identity and irrelevance to a secular world emerges, church and Sunday school attendance drop dramatically. While others overcame small numbers by uniting, the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales was continued and largely taken over by evangelical Presbyterians. The last period (1990s, pp. 397-420) are discussed in the light of the PCA’s rejection of Dr. Peter Scott Cameron, champion for women’s ordination and Bible criticism, who misread the signs of the times in Presbyterian Australia.

Evaluation

It was in 1829, during the days of the early British settlement in New South Wales, that Thomas Carlyle wrote his famous “Signs of the Times” for the *Edinburgh Review*. (Cf. *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Volume 3, London Chapman and Hall, 1858.) While some gloried in the progress of the age, the emerging empire and the end of the Napoleonic wars, Carlyle in gloomy Scotland, heartland of Presbyterianism, considered the signs of the times:

The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work only in the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: This is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us. The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the Beautiful and Good; but a calculation of the Profitable. Worship, indeed, in any sense, is not recognised among us, or is mechanically explained into Fear of pain, or Hope of pleasure. Our true Deity is Mechanism. It has subdued external Nature for us, and we think it will do all other things (CWT, v.3, p. 111).

Carlyle also noticed the failure of his times to produce great men who stood for great ideas and convictions. The same countries and constitutions were still there, but without the heroes they used to produce and without the spiritual motives of bygone ages. Eleven years later this would ultimately lead to his lectures on heroes and hero worship. In Hutchinson’s *History of the Presbyterian Church in NSW* the careful reader will not be able to circumvent some of Car-

lyle's heritage. Both like to explain and share a longing for heroes, but there is a striking dissimilarity between Carlyle and Hutchinson. The old Scot and even Manning Clark in his way (especially in his retirement years) tried to get through to the stage of higher ideas and ultimate theological reasons of divine purpose behind a sociological surface. Hutchinson's book is about relationships between people, "warm flesh of relationship and common spirituality over the cold bones of Church law, polity, and financial structure." (p. 419)

In essence, this is a secular history about a religious people. Carlyle was still looking for men of valour to arrive on the scene, a survival of truth and authenticity in the ultimate sense, inspiring in new ways after past failures. By contrast, the author of *Iron in the Blood* appears to have given up hope that there will always be such men. His reasons are what could daringly be described as "sociological predestination". The days are simply over and we should no longer expect men such as Angus and McGowan (cf. pp. 245-51). Please note that in *Iron in the Blood* the greatness of these men is not defined by the importance of their ideas and steadfastness in pursuing them, but by their influence as leaders and popular support. This is a very different kind of heroism to that which Carlyle would recommend or aspire to. Hutchinson has become a victim of what the former would call "the mechanical age".

Iron in the blood is the history of a religious community. It is an enjoyable history; it is cleverly written and keeps track of developments; it connects with a changing world and takes theological convictions and debates into account; but it is the history of a religious community and not a Church history. The somewhat awkward element is that it was the church who explicitly commissioned him to write a social history. It would hardly be fair to blame the author for doing his job, but one should realise the implications of horizontal scientific paradigms.

The great Absentee

There is a vast difference between a social history of religion (*Iron in the Blood*) and a *historia ecclesiastica*. Although the author realises the importance of convictions, they are treated as socially distinctive features that are more or less successful when translated into numbers

and social relevance. While the author may be of the opinion that there is more to it than mere sociology, perhaps implicitly indicating this in the title of the book, this may have been an afterthought, covering the revival of doctrine in Presbyterianism in the continuing church after the union in 1977 and the importance of doctrine and preaching in Presbyterianism throughout the ages as a special social feature of this communion. This church had after all commissioned him to write the book, and the importance of traditional doctrine was an important feature of this community.

Iron in the blood is not the history of God and his relationship with his succeeding and failing people in New South Wales. It is the history of a religious community and its members' experiences in a Presbyterian background of a Scottish heritage. The Spirit, the purposes of a divine Reality with ideals for his church and working them out in NSW of all places on earth, love beyond the horizontal, are the great absentees. This is not a book on the Catholic Church on earth, attempting to glorify God and enjoying Him forever.

The author has ultimately left us with the bare bones of Ernie Vines (p. 397) without the Spirit to make them alive. Even the "spiritual" is horizontally defined (p. 419). A vague "evangelical" commitment to shared spirituality, and loving and forgiving one another as Presbyterians shall not cause these bones to rise again. Only the great Absentee in this book will be able to do that. This of course is a theological conviction.

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