

Jim Davidson, *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W. K. Hancock* (University of New South Wales Press, 2010)

Reviewed by Selwyn Cornish¹

W. K. (Sir Keith) Hancock, a founder of the Australian National University, is sometimes regarded as Australia's pre-eminent historian. His work, however, is not as well known as that of some other Australian historians, among them Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey. And while he produced a number of autobiographical works, important details of his life remained obscure. This new biography by Jim Davidson, comprehensively researched and beautifully written, should help to make Hancock's life and work better known, though the scale of the book, and the academic nature of its contents, will doubtless limit its readership. Even so, it deserves to be widely read. Australians are generally reluctant to praise tall poppies, preferring instead to cut them down. But as we mature as a nation our failure to accord due recognition to those who have achieved excellence in intellectual pursuits might change. This book will assist us, for Hancock deserves our admiration for his outstanding historical research, which Davidson discusses at great length and superbly well.

Hancock was born in Melbourne in 1898 and died in Canberra in 1988. The son of an Anglican clergyman, he spent his early years in Bairnsdale, Victoria. He attended Melbourne Grammar and later the University of Melbourne, where he was a resident at Trinity College. Majoring in history, he graduated with first-class honours. Upon the completion of his degree he accepted a temporary lectureship at the University of Western Australia, a position offered to him by Edward Shann, the university's professor of history and economics. Shann urged him to apply for a Rhodes scholarship, which he did, and he was successful. Hancock then went to Balliol College, Oxford, where he was influenced by the Master of Balliol, the redoubtable A. L. Smith, and by the historians Humphrey Sumner and Kenneth Bell. Taking first-class honours in modern history, he was immediately elected to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls College, the first Australian to become a Fellow of All Souls, one of the most prestigious academic appointments in the world. After a visit to Tuscany he became interested in nineteenth-century Italian political history and wrote his first book on *Ricasoli*

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and the *Risorgimento in Tuscany* (1926). After marrying an Australian, Hancock returned to Australia to take up the chair of modern history at the University of Adelaide. Aged 24, he was the youngest professor in the British Commonwealth.

In Adelaide, Hancock wrote his second book, and perhaps his most enduring work, a history of Australia since the foundation of European settlement. It remains, as Davidson rightly adjudges, 'one of the classic accounts of this country'. More recently, the book, entitled *Australia* (1930), has acquired something of a cult status, especially among those who are opposed to government intervention in the economy. In it, Hancock was critical of key elements of the 'Australian settlement', the collection of economic policies that were adopted in large measure after the devastating depression of the 1890s. They included tariff protection, compulsory arbitration and state socialism. These policies, Hancock contended, had restricted competition, inhibited productivity growth, and would lead ultimately to stagnation. He preferred the more open society that had emerged in Australia during the nineteenth century, dependent as it was on an economy devoted to international trade, free markets and private ownership. This form of economy had transformed Australia from a penal settlement to a nation possessing the highest standards of living in the world, a remarkable feat that had taken scarcely a century to achieve. Hancock's pursuit of this central theme owed much to his earlier association with Shann, whose *Economic History of Australia*, published in the same year as Hancock's book, followed a similar theme. Shann had disparaged policies underpinning what he called a 'hermit economy'; Hancock shared the same disdain for excessive regulation. It was also Shann, it seems, who opened Hancock's eyes to the critical importance of economic history for the comprehension of historical processes.

After tiring of Adelaide, and disappointed with the limited engagement by Australians in intellectual discourse, Hancock returned to England, where he was appointed to the chair of modern history at the University of Birmingham. There he was invited to undertake a survey of political, economic and social affairs in the British Commonwealth. This work entailed extensive international travel, especially to such trouble spots as Ireland, Palestine and South Africa. It resulted in the *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, a massive work published in two volumes between 1937 and 1942 (volume 2 was so extensive that it had to be published in two parts). This acclaimed work led to his recognition as the world's leading authority on the history of the British Empire and Commonwealth. It led as well, in 1941, to his appointment as General Editor of the civilian volumes of the *Official History of Britain in the Second World War*. From an office in Whitehall he commissioned and edited 27 of the 28 volumes in the series and, with Margaret Gowing, he wrote the volume on the British economy during the war. In 1944 he was appointed Chichele Professor of Economic History in the University of Oxford.

When the war ended, Hancock was invited to become one of the four so-called maestros appointed to advise the Interim Council of the newly established ANU. Hancock was assigned responsibility for planning the creation of the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH), one of the original four research schools. It was expected that he would become the Foundation Director of RSSH, but he initially declined the offer, finally taking it up in 1957, when he was also appointed inaugural Professor of History. His reluctance to join the ANU at its foundation arose in part because of problems he encountered when attempting to recruit staff of the quality he thought should occupy senior academic positions in RSSH (this reviewer has written about Hancock's difficulties with the appointment of the first professor of economics at ANU).² There were also disagreements with the Interim Council, among them its rejection of Hancock's idea that the RSSH and the Research School of Pacific Studies should have the same director (namely Hancock), at least in the university's formative years.

Instead of joining the ANU in the late 1940s, Hancock became the director of the new Institute of Commonwealth Studies, and Professor of British Commonwealth Affairs, in the University of London. There he wrote and edited historical works on the British Commonwealth. In 1954 he was invited by the governor of Uganda, Sir Andrew Cohen, to conduct a mission to resolve a constitutional dispute between the governor and the Kingdom of Buganda. The mission was a success, with Hancock brokering an agreement that was acceptable to the parties involved. Before he embarked on the mission, he had accepted an invitation by Cambridge University Press to write a major biography of the South African Prime Minister and statesman, Field Marshall Jan Christian Smuts. After completing the biography, and following his retirement from the chair of history at ANU, Hancock wrote a pioneering work of regional and environmental history, *Discovering Monaro* (1972). In his retirement he also wrote several books of essays on various topics, historical and political, as well as additional autobiographical pieces. Before his retirement, he had taken the leading role in the creation of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, one of the great national publishing enterprises arising from the ANU, and was one of the founders of the Academy of the Humanities. In his later years, he became an environmentalist and a peace activist, opposing the building of the telecommunications tower on Black Mountain in Canberra, and writing and speaking against the spread and use of nuclear power and weapons.

Davidson devotes a separate chapter to Hancock's difficult marriage to Theaden, his first wife. They had met at Melbourne University in 1918 when they were both studying history; they graduated in the same honours class. The marriage lasted for 40 years, ending with Theaden's death from cancer after a long illness. Both wanted to have children but they remained childless, their hopes finally

² Cornish (2007).

being dashed when Theaden was advised to have a hysterectomy. Hancock's career dominated the marriage. He dedicated himself to his work and Theaden felt neglected. She began to paint, and was moderately successful. Within hours of her death, Hancock destroyed all their letters to each other, and he quickly remarried his research assistant. This correspondence, had it survived, would have opened up Hancock's private life to greater scrutiny; as it is, we know little about it.

From the available biographical material Davidson distils a number of central themes. One is the difficulty Hancock experienced when coming to grips with the fact that he was both an Australian and an historian, what Davidson refers to as Hancock's 'attachment to Australia and advancement in England'. Hancock himself confessed that he was 'in love with two soils'. He called his major work in autobiography *Country and Calling*, which illuminates this ambiguity. Hancock was an Australian historian but, unlike Clark and Blainey, he never wanted to be regarded simply as an historian of Australia. His writing embraced a number of countries, and he worked for most of his professional life outside Australia. Davidson seeks to capture the essence of this ambiguity, between love of country and desire for professional recognition overseas, in the phrase, *A Three-Cornered Life*, which he adopts as the title of his book: England, Australia and Italy (later replaced by South Africa) were the three corners of Hancock's world. He frequently referred to himself as an 'independent Australian Briton', a phrase that had been coined by Alfred Deakin, Australia's second prime minister.

Attention is also drawn to Hancock's upbringing in a strong Christian household and the influence of his father in the moulding of his ethical and moral outlook. Hancock's 'Christian-based liberal humanism' is mentioned several times in the book. 'Liberalism', Davidson contends, 'was the projection of such values into the public arena; it had become predicated on an applied Christian ethic'. According to Davidson, 'Hancock provides a text-book stance of how old-fashioned liberalism was predicated on traditional Christian values'. A senior Oxford historian (Reginald Coupland) wrote of Hancock that 'Any book of his is — as he puts it — a confession of faith'. An ANU colleague (Robin Gollan) wrote that Hancock was 'driven by a moral impulse which found expression in his work as a rare mixture of science and art'.

Davidson's coverage of Hancock's work, and his recording of the major events in Hancock's life, is generally done well. And yet, Hancock remains an enigma. His autobiographical writing, like Davidson's biography, rehearsed aspects of his work and career. But not much was revealed about his inner thoughts and motivations. The same can be said of Davidson's biography. We are told that Hancock was ambitious: one his colleagues at All Souls (A. L. Rowse) said about Hancock that 'If a door opened before him, he could not but go through

it'. We know that he was a brilliant historian: an Australian historian (Stuart MacIntyre) has said that 'If there were a Nobel Prize for history, Hancock would surely have won it'. He was knighted twice and received from the Republic of Italy the Order of Merit; nine universities conferred honorary doctorates upon him. He was strongly committed to his academic work: his impressive list of published work is testimony to that. As to his private thoughts and feelings, they remain a mystery.

Reference

Cornish, Selwyn 2007, 'The Appointment of the ANU's First Professor of Economics', *History of Economics Review* 46: 1–18.