Religious Conversion and the Historical Moment

_The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World_

By Robert Kenny

Scribe Publications Melbourne, 384 pp, $39.95, 2007


Reviewed by Chris Healy

_The Lamb Enters the Dreaming_ opens and closes in cemeteries. The first is the burial place of Philip Pepper, a Wotjobaluk man. His grave lies amid the ruins of the Ebenezer Mission 400 kilometres northwest of Melbourne. In 1858, it was to this place that young German missionaries had come to bring the Word and Light of God to Indigenous people. The other cemetery is at Ramahyuck, east of Melbourne on the Gippsland Lakes. Ramahyuck is where Nathanael Pepper, Philip’s brother, died and was buried in 1877, aged thirty-six.

Nathanael was a celebrated convert in Christianity at Ebenezer in 1860. For Kenny, this conversion offers an opportunity to consider closely the rupturing of the Wotjobaluk world and the role of (various kinds of) Christianity in the colonisation of Victoria. But Nathanael’s becoming Christian as Christianity was becoming Wotjobaluk is only one stopover in Kenny’s ambitious itinerary. Greg Dening was right to call it a brilliant ride and to note that it was a distinctively La Trobe project. This is a book that should be handed to any publisher who thinks that a good monograph cannot be fashioned from a PhD. It is an important book for anyone interested in the consequences of colonialism and indigeneity for twenty-first century Australia. But it’s also been around for a while.

Many _AHR_ readers will already know this book because it has been the recipient of numerous awards. According to Kenny’s staff profile at La Trobe University, it’s been the ‘winner of both the 2008 Australian Historical Association’s W. K. Hancock Prize and the 2008 Victorian Premier’s Award for First Book of History. It was also Short-listed in the Adelaide Festival Award for Literature (non-fiction) and Commended in the Victorian Community History Awards’. The website doesn’t note that it was also the joint winner, along with Tom Griffiths’ _Slicing the Silence_, of the 2008 Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History.
Thus, this review is belated. So rather than pretend that it has not been adequately ‘reviewed’ more than once, and trudge in familiar footsteps, from here on in I depart from some of the usual conventions of reviewing.

I like histories that work through moments of intensity. I like it when a writer can persuade me that her work derives its force from a moment when seemingly unrelated ley lines converged. *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* is such a book and the conversion of Nathanael Pepper is its moment. Again and again Kenny returns to 1860 when, in Pepper’s words, he ‘went down the river and thought how He prayed in the garden til His sweat came out as blood, and—and that for me’ (196).

The rupturing of which Kenny writes was as recent to Pepper as Paul Keating being Treasurer and the Bhopal disaster, the introduction of the one-dollar coin and the Milperra massacre are to us. Yet the consequences of such colonial ‘events’ for the Indigenous population, even at the most basic level, has been catastrophic; peoples who were reckoned in the tens of thousands were counted by hundreds. Kenny considers this through the epidemiology of disease and settler violence, through Wotjobaluk accommodation and perception, through the ‘opportunism and greed’ of some settlers (239) and the despairing faith of others (35).

Kenny’s linking of religion and the legacy of colonial violence and dispossession is stunningly successful. For example, he makes complex sense of why the Moravian missionaries thought it so important that Pepper built a hut when he arrived at the mission; it was ‘a sign that the curse of Ham had been lifted’ (82). In the wonderful chapter ‘The Centaur’s Entrance’ Kenny imagines the deep impact on the Wotjobaluk of the sheep and cattle that came onto their lands. The colonists themselves emerge, in Kenny’s telling, as more complex figures than the caricatures which historiography has so often bequeathed.

But what, might we ask, is in the value of the story of Pepper’s conversion for a contemporary historian such as Kenny? Although this question could be answered in a number of ways, it seems to me that there are two strong possibilities. Firstly, Nathanael’s conversion gives Kenny the opportunity to write a different kind of history. *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* begins with an epigraph from Richard Rorty that calls for the writing of history to be concerned with ‘an endless network of changing relationships, without any great climatic ruptures or peripeties’ (from the Greek peripeteia meaning ‘A sudden change of fortune or reverse of circumstances’). As already stated, when he goes about this kind of historiographic practice, Kenny is thoughtful and compelling, challenging and creative. But there is another mode in which Kenny engages with these questions and that’s as a grumpy and sometimes dismissive critic.
Scattered throughout the book and collected in the chapter ‘A Scar in the Air’ are various dismissive asides and disparaging condemnations of modernism, theory, relativism, postmodernism, Derrida and the notion of culture. It’s certainly the case that, in some of these instances, Kenny is gesturing towards important questions. For example, the equation of disenchantment, post-religiosity and modernism is certainly ham-fisted Hegalianism. However, in contrast to his very careful and thorough approach to writing history and teasing out nineteenth-century religious or scientific history, Kenny’s orientation to theoretical critique lacks both care and generosity. He conjures enemies where he might find friends. His mode doesn’t allow him to see that, as a matter of intellectual history, some of the theorists he ridicules have in fact produced the ground from which he writes. To take only one example, he finds James Clifford (like Clifford Geertz) sorely lacking in his conceptualisation of culture. Clifford’s point is that culture, despite being ‘a deeply compromised term’, is one which he ‘cannot yet do without’. For Kenny this is a self-referential conceit. Yet ‘cultural history’ is a term quoted in the epigraph to the book and Clifford’s work, particularly in essays such as ‘Fort Ross Meditation’, often explores precisely the issues with which Kenny is concerned, and in the same spirit.

Secondly, Pepper’s conversion also enables Kenny to ask Nathanael’s question from Scripture: ‘Can any good come out of Nazareth?’ Sometimes Kenny answers the question in terms of what it meant for Pepper himself, as a personal experience, and his answer is unequivocal: ‘out of Nazareth, came the balm of sense to the suffering, and with it the possibility of survival and prosperity for the future’ (335). That such possibilities were never realised was, for Kenny, not a consequence of missionisation or Christianity (nor indeed any other meta-narratives) but of the particular and shifting forces that constituted settler-colonisation in Victoria. At other times, however, the conversion becomes a metaphor for how the Wotjobaluk negotiated colonisation. It provided, ‘for him [Pepper] and his people, a sense of salvation and a cognition of the world, but also an understanding that settlement was the only future. … The Lamb was now in the Dreaming’ (337). While Kenny’s intention may not be to offer a straightforward ethical lesson to his readers, surely these questions remain unsettling? If, metaphorically, conversion and settlement were ‘the only future’ in 1860, then isn’t it important that 150 years later it seems radically inadequate to describe indigenous Australians as converted and settled? Otherwise, we might be condemned always to begin and end in cemeteries.

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