The Great Encourager: The ANU’s W.K. Hancock

The Chancellor of The Australian National University, Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AO QC launched Jim Davidson’s biography A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian WK Hancock (UNSW Press) in front of 80 guests of the National Centre for Biography on 17 July 2010. Sir Keith Hancock was one of the ADB’s founders. We present the text of Gareth Evans speech.

GARETH EVANS: Being neither a history student nor, until now, an ANU person, the first time I really became aware of the subject of Jim Davidson’s admirable biography was in the mid-1970s, when the great man was in full cantankerous-fox-terrier mode crusading against the Black Mountain Tower. This was much to the rage of the then Whitlam Government, as I recall hovering around Lionel Murphy’s office as a rather junior adviser at the time, although rather more to the wonderment of subsequent generations of Canberrans, who seem to have rather taken to the tower as a graceful punctuation mark on the skyline rather than the monstrous environmental carbuncle that Sir Keith portrayed it as.

The rather quirky and decidedly radical Hancock of the later years, who springs so colourfully from the last chapter or so of Jim’s book, and from the pages of his own last works, particularly Discovering Monaro and Professing History, is a hugely committed environmentalist, passionate opponent of nuclear weapons, scourge of neo-Nazism and sensitive portrayer of Aboriginal culture. And to any but the most reactionary modern eyes and ears, and I have to confess my own, this Hancock is a rather more accessible, engaging and sympathetic character than the one who occupies the first 400 or so pages of this colossal study.

For all his obviously instinctive decency, and for all the freshness of vision that he brought to so much of his historical writing, Hancock was very much a product of his time – in being for example, as the author clearly shows us, less than condemnatory about Hitler when he first came to power in the early 1930s, deeply understanding of the White Australia policy, treating indigenous Australians as irrelevant to our own history and blacks as irrelevant to South Africa’s, and buying the idea the old Commonwealth as a force for global peace and security well past its use-by date. Not to mention being more English than the English, and Oxonian than the Oxonians, in his formality of style, delight in titles, distaste for first names, and generally deep personal reserve: so buttoned up that, as Davidson delightfully quotes the New Statesman review of his autobiography, Country and Calling, “It appears from the story that he marries, but it is never quite clear whom”.

But of course it’s the worst kind of hindsight to judge someone against standards which were at the time no part of anyone’s worldview, and there is a huge amount to admire –
as this biography makes abundantly clear – about Hancock’s life, both personally and professionally.

At the personal level, he inherited from his father a Christianity of the kind made manifest in basic human kindliness and decency, not ecclesiastical pomp. He was evidently wonderful with kids of all kinds, including – as he has confirmed to me – the BBC’s Nik Gowing (second-named Keith by his mother Margaret, with whom Hancock worked closely on the war histories): although it remains unclear whether the cat which our knight apparently used to swing by the tail to amuse the young Nik thought quite the same way. And as Davidson’s deeply touching chapter on Hancock’s marriage to Theaden puts beyond doubt, for all the problems created over many years by his work habits and preoccupations – not unusual with obsessive husbands – there were really deep reservoirs of affection and respect between the two. (I do rather wish this chapter, for which the reader has to wait 420 pages, had been placed much earlier in the book, because I was until then having the New Statesman reviewer’s problem. But about a Meanjin editor’s judgment in these matters I suppose there can be no dispute).

To be admired about the public Hancock was first, and above all, the sheer volume, quality of analysis, lucidity and professionalism of his writing over six decades, in his successive roles as a fellow of All Souls, holder of history chairs at Adelaide, Birmingham, Oxford and the ANU, and director of research projects, institutes and schools in London and Canberra. The “span” of it, for a start, to use one of his favourite words, remains simply breathtaking: more than twenty highly original books and monographs, including full-scale works on the Italian risorgimento, Australia, the British Commonwealth, key volumes of the multivolume official history of Britain on the WWII homefront he edited, the two-volume Jan Smuts biography, two volumes of his own autobiography, and a mountain of shorter pieces.

Then there was the role he played as the great encourager of others – not least his biographer here, as Jim makes clear – nurturing and drawing out new or latent talents; creating a collegial rather than hermit-like environment in all the institutional settings in which he worked; by goading, praising and sheer force of example getting people to produce their best work – and leaving a lasting legacy of respect and affection in the history profession. Sometimes the support and encouragement ended in tears – most spectacularly in the case of the appalling Malcolm Ellis and the Australian Dictionary of Biography project – but it’s hard to be censorious of someone led into error by believing in the hidden best, rather than recognizing the obvious worst, in his putative colleagues.
Of course what Hancock will always be most remembered for here in Canberra is his role in the birth and growth of the ANU. The story is a long and complex one, well told in Stephen Foster and Margaret Varghese’s excellent history of the University, and now told again in even more fascinating detail in this biography. It starts with the identification, by Coombs and others right at the outset, of Hancock – along with Oliphant and Florey – as one of the international stars on whose commitment the whole project will stand or fall; it continues with Hancock’s vacillation over whether to return to head the Research School of Social Sciences, and the conditions on which he would do so; comes to an apparent shuddering halt with his St James Park bench conversation with Douglas Copland in 1949 which led him to walk away from the whole project; then ends happily, after all, with the return of the native to accept the RSSS Directorship after all in 1957, his highly successful performance in that role for four years, followed by another five years as Professor of History and yet another twenty very productive years after that as a University Fellow until he died at the age of 90 in 1988.

There are times reading this tale – with all the incredible early-year frustrations, false starts, dead-ends, meanderings and misunderstandings it relates – when I don’t think I would be alone as a reader in wanting to reach back into the pages of this history, grab our central character by the neck and say “for Godsake, just make a bloody decision”.

It’s in this context I think, more than anywhere else, that Jim Davidson brings out the central tension in Hancock’s life, between – as Hancock put it himself in his own biography - country on the one hand, with his intense and enduring passion, nurtured above all in his Bairnsdale childhood, for his own native soil; and calling on the other, his sense that he could only fully realize his professional destiny in the UK, and particularly Oxford. As Jim puts it so well (p.254), “Hancock wanted country and calling to merge; he dreamed of an All Souls in the Bush. Until he was satisfied that something like it could be achieved in ‘a high quality enterprise on Australian soil’, he was not prepared to commit himself.” And he didn’t – at least not until seven years later, when the new University was well and truly established, with its own very special identity.

I have to say that, despite the urge to which I have confessed to retrospectively strangle the great man for all his Hamlet-like agonizing – his reluctance to leave the stones and
Dr Margaret Stevens (L), former ANU vice-chancellor, Prof Anthony Low, and Dr Ann Moyal all worked for Sir Keith Hancock at the ANU

spires of Oxford for the bricks of Canberra, the green grass for the brown – I do have a sneaking personal empathy for the dilemma he felt. Some of you, I fear, may have seen the tape from an ABC Four Corners program many years ago about Australian expatriates abroad – which tends to resurface every few years when someone gets the urge to embarrass me – which has me, the Melbourne tramdriver’s son, languidly sprawled on a Christ Church meadow bench circa 1969, being asked the question as to when I am planning to come home, and replying in an impossibly Bridesheadian drawl “Well, one feels about all that rather like St Augustine: God give me chastity and continence, but not yet”. With that in my own past, twenty years of Australian cultural growth and maturity later, I can hardly blame Hancock for his own Augustinianism: what seems now an incredibly remote and not easily understandable cultural deference to the mother country’s brand of civilization was very real then.

The biographer’s art is not just to give us information and analysis, though Jim Davidson – after many years of research all over Hancock’s world – has certainly given us that in spades. It is to draw us right into the subject’s world, to understand it and feel it, and to understand not just how but why he or she acted as he did – and perhaps understand ourselves better as a result. Jim Davidson has done all of this superbly, and his publishers have done him proud with the finished product. This is a book which is going to have a very long shelf-life and library life indeed, and it thoroughly deserves to. Congratulations to UNSW Press, and above all to the author, for a job wonderfully well done.