

Thomas Malthus and Australian Thought

by Sheila Newman

Contemporary documents indicate that Malthus's economic and demographic views impacted strongly on Australian culture from an early time and were reinforced later by Darwin's theories. When academic political economists abandoned the Malthusian principles of economic protectionism and demographic prudence,¹ these nevertheless continued to underpin the world view of much of the Australian scientific (natural sciences) community as well as popular political and economic sentiment. A reason for this was that, whereas mainstream "Western" economic thought diverged markedly away from Malthus, via Ricardo, mainstream scientific evolutionary discussion continued to build on his distinctively organic ideas, via Darwin.² The disciplines of economic and natural science have since continued to have less and less to say to each other. These trends were not peculiar to Australia, but this historic record suggests that, while the natural sciences' view on population dynamics was partly eclipsed by that of economics, it has retained greater dominance in Australia than in comparable countries.

Cook's expedition to Australia prior to settlement was truly scientific and the continent

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and activity. Largely due to the protection geographic isolation afforded, Australia was able to develop distinctive cultural, economic and political streams and the "natural sciences" perspective has survived to feature prominently in Australian population policy discussion at national enquiry level, whereas, in Europe and the U.S. this discussion is dominated by socio-economic and ethno-cultural paradigms.

The Malthusian scientific view dovetailed with Australian agricultural thinking, for Malthus's economic writing complemented his demographic theory and appealed to agriculturalists. In his essay, *Grounds for an Opinion on the Policy of Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn*, Malthus made the point strongly that it was only where rent was high, that is where

It is a little known fact that the especially low density of Australia's aboriginal people inspired Malthus's first essay on population.

profits were considerable on agricultural products, that agriculture would expand into marginal lands. Where profit was low, the cost of extending agriculture was too high and farmers tended to restrict production to the most high-yielding areas of their properties. Malthus thought that achieving high profits required a degree of protectionism and he also endorsed limited national self sufficiency, with government able to oversee the security of the production of staples.³ His policies would have suited early Australian settlers in an economy where Malthus's protectionist theories lacked the opposition provided in England by a strong industrial manufacturing sector. In fact protectionism dominated Australian agricultural and foreign policy from early times, and, until the 1980s or thereabouts, provided rare common ground for both labor and capital.

The importance of Malthus' economic and demographic views is strongly indicated by the extraordinary number of early editions of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) in

Australian libraries as well as many copies of his seminal essays: *Grounds for an Opinion on the Policy of Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn* (1815) and *An Enquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent* (1815). Evidence for the ongoing development of the Malthusian perspective in the nineteenth century is further provided by the profusion of works by John Stuart Mill,⁴ Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, available in both public and private libraries.⁵

Malthusian Foundations of Early Settlement in Australia

*In addition to the omnipresent problem of poverty, a bothersome question worried England throughout most of the eighteenth century: the question of how many Englishmen there were.*⁶

Population growth in England had caused the demand for grain to exceed supply and the price of a bushel of wheat quadrupled. Between 1790 and 1813 profits on medium sized farms rose from 88 to 160 English pounds.⁷

Many crimes were committed out of dire poverty, to get food, clothing or fuel. There were 160 crimes punishable by hanging and many others punishable by transportation to penal colonies overseas. Due to technological change many people had lost their way of earning a living and the enclosure of farmland prevented them from running animals on the commons. Rural drift to the cities compounded the overcrowding and desperation there.⁸ The jails were overcrowded in 18th century England and after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, America rejected prison ships. Malthus later described the Irish population as outstripping both agricultural production and capital⁹ and by 1801, the Irish formed one third of the convict population in Australia.¹⁰

In 1770, under the auspices of the Royal [scientific] Society of England, Captain James Cook sailed to Tahiti officially to observe the transit of Venus, but also to spy out new land. While searching for Van Diemen's Land (now an island State of Australia called Tasmania), Cook's vessel was blown off course and he and the scientists accompanying him, one of whom was Joseph Banks, the botanist, landed at Botany Bay, on the South East coast of Australia. There they stayed for eight days. Joseph Banks was able to observe

many strange new plants and animals and, a man of his times, wrote several paragraphs wondering at the low density of the Aboriginal peoples.

*Whatever may be the reason of this want of People is difficult [sic] to guess, unless perhaps the Barrenness of the Soil and scarcity of fresh water; but why mankind should not increase here as fast as in other places...*¹¹

Malthus reveals in his second essay on population that Banks' remarks were the **cause** of his first famous "Essay on the Principle of Population," but he confuses Banks with Cook:

*A view of these checks, in most of the countries of which we have the best accounts, was taken in the [first] Essay on Population [Malthus, 1798]. The object was to trace, in each country, those checks which appeared to be most effective in repressing population; and to endeavor to answer the question, generally, which had been applied, particularly, to New Holland [Australia] by Captain Cook, [sic] namely, "By what means is the population of this country kept down to the number which it can subsist?"*¹²

It was Joseph Banks, the botanist, who proposed that the British government might relieve the overcrowding of its prisons by sending convicts to New South Wales, the South East tip of Australia.

European Colonization, 1788

From 1788, the date of the first settlement by Europeans in New South Wales, the survival of the colony was in doubt. The climate was hostile, unknown and unpredictable. The seasons were the reverse of those in the northern hemisphere and they were overshadowed by the stronger ten-year El Niño cycle of "droughts and flooding rains."¹³ Water was scarce and the soils were sparse and lacking in nitrogen, phosphorus and trace elements. Moreover the first settlers — convicts and soldiers — knew nothing of agriculture and had not been adequately provided with essential tools for survival, such as hoes, axes, fishing lines and hooks. The misery of the early years of settlement was not

lightened by the frequent floggings, solitary confinements and executions, some of which were punishments for stealing food.¹⁴

Captain-Lieutenant Watkin Tench, who was there, records in 1790:

Famine besides was approaching with gigantic strides, and gloom and dejection overspread every

“...specimen collections from Australia’s peculiar ecology caused a [new] focus for evolutionary theory. Darwin visited in 1836.”

*countenance. Men abandoned themselves to the most desponding reflections and adopted the most extravagant conjectures.*¹⁵

The situation degenerated into black Malthusian comedy, as the settlers sought to disguise their plight from Baneelon, an Aboriginal they had captured for anthropological study. They feared that if Baneelon escaped he would alert his tribesmen to their weakened condition and the Aborigines would finish them off. Tench recorded that their rations for a week were insufficient to keep Baneelon for a day and the starving settlers felt obliged to hunt and fish for extra, entirely on his behalf. Nevertheless Baneelon became increasingly unhappy and managed to escape.¹⁶

Settlement of other parts of Australia was no less fraught with difficulties, especially in expanding agriculturally productive territory. What was to become the second most populous State, Victoria, adjacent to the State of New South Wales, proved inaccessible by land for a very long time, due to the intervening uncharted and extensive Blue Mountains. The capital city of Melbourne was not established until 1836 and Victoria did not become separate from New South Wales until 1851. This was the same year as the beginning of the gold rush, which accelerated economic development and demographic growth. Exploration was really only completed around 1865, by which time Australians had basic information about the resources and limitations of the continent.

Immigration schemes sponsoring cheap or indentured labor eventually replaced convict labor

and, between 1830 and 1850, about 125,000 immigrants arrived in New South Wales and Victoria, and another 60,000 in West Australia and South Australia. Settlers found land so infertile that many had to release their indentured laborers because they were unable to feed them. Ladies and gentlemen were obliged to scavenge from their fields with their own hands.¹⁷ Between 1851 and 1857, 400,000 migrants poured in from Great Britain and Europe and Asia, including 40,000 Chinese and many poor Irish, the latter fleeing the famine conditions and typhoid that the great potato blight had brought.

Banks and Cook’s discoveries and subsequent explorations and specimen collections from Australia’s peculiar ecology had caused a furor and Australia became a focus for evolutionary theory. Charles Darwin visited in 1836.

Darwin wrote of Australia’s great biophysical disadvantages, making shrewd observations on soil, vegetation, and climate. Coal deposits might provide Australia with energy for manufactures and transport, he wrote, but regarding Australia’s future prospects, he concluded:

I formerly imagined that Australia would rise to be as grand and powerful a country as North America, but now it appears to me that such future grandeur is rather problematical.

Both Alfred Russell Wallace and Charles Darwin, co-founders of the theory of evolution, were deeply impressed by Malthus’ works. Not only did they evolve virtually identical theories quite separately, but each made the extraordinary claim that Malthus’ essay on population had been **the** inspiration that had caused the sudden synthesis of the main thesis.¹⁹ They presented a joint paper in 1858 at the Linnean Society in England.

In 1859 Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published. Not surprisingly it was a big hit in Australia, as the numerous copies available in public libraries of the time attest.²⁰

Professor W.E. Hearn
and Biological Economics

Professor Hearn was made the first professor of political economy at Melbourne University (Victoria) at a time (1854) when there were only two

universities in Australia. He was the author of *Plutology, or the Theory of the Effort to Satisfy Human Wants*, 1863.²¹ This textbook, built upon his economics lectures, was used by students for sixty years — until 1924. It was based on a biological view of economics, referring copiously to Darwinian ecology and Malthusian economics. Although Hearn believed that population growth was a factor of considerable importance which would ultimately prove problematic — "like all other organisms, the social organism is subject to fixed conditions and limits of growth"²² — he came down on the side that having lots of people was a good thing for production in the meantime.²³ He also favored free trade, earning the opprobrium of the governor of Victoria, who refused to fund the chair on the grounds that free trade was strongly out of line with Australian opinion.²⁴

But despite Hearn's optimistic views on Malthusian demographics and his academically fashionable free market attitudes, he appears to have been one of the last Australian academic economic theorists to have married economics with the natural world. In fact, the post-Second World War economic historian, J. A. La Nauze, identified him as the father of a kind of "biological economics." That La Nauze obviously found Hearn's manner of interpreting all things through organic glasses infuriatingly old fashioned and vaguely repulsive lends weight to the respect he grudgingly accorded Hearn. He crediting him with a first in the area of systematic Darwinian economics, describing him as having created, "... the first book in English (and I think in any language) systematically to apply the Darwinian theory of organic evolution to political economy, and to insist that the proper method for the study of economic society was biological."

La Nauze's contempt²⁶ in 1948 regarding Malthus, Darwin and associated biological determinists and economic and philosophical theorists, is also suggestive of some massive battle going on among the academics of political economy from the 1850s and well into the 20th century. His detailed analysis²⁷ of Hearn's approach to social problems in *Plutology* gives more indications of the pervasive influence of Malthus, Darwin, and Mill in Australia in Hearn's time and as subjects for discussion at Melbourne

University.

La Nauze comments that "evolutionary ideas were in the air" in Hearn's time, but summarizes that "[i]t is in the application of *biological* concepts of evolution to political economy that Hearn's originality lies. He argues in some detail that J.S. Mill, Henry Fawcett, and Cairnes, who were Hearn's English contemporaries, never synthesized anything like Hearn's biological economics."²⁸

Hearn dominated a school of political economic thought in Melbourne, as a writer for the conservative *Argus* newspaper, as a member of parliament from 1873, and for at least the sixty years his book survived as the main economics text at the only university in that State. Here was a solid bridge for the continuation of the stream of Australian organic evolutionary thinking from the

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nineteenth century well into the twentieth. No other Australian economic texts were published in Melbourne for sixty years after *Plutology*.

Coincidentally, or perhaps inevitably, in 1922 a charismatic geographer and adventurer stepped in just as Hearn's book was being removed from the syllabus and replaced with something more modern and less biological. The geographer's name was Thomas Griffith Taylor, and his students still talk of him.²⁹ Taylor (1880-1963) argued that Australia could never support more than 65 million people due to its biophysical limitations. He later amended this to 20 million, assuming much higher per capita living standards. Not only does Taylor seem to have been the first to publish the connection between population numbers and affluence (consumption) against the background of local biophysical characteristics and constraints, but he eerily predicted the likely population of Australia as no more than 20 million in the year 2000.³⁰ Until Taylor left Australia six years later (for North America³¹) there was heated debate about Australia's population capacity.³² His work gave rise to, or consolidated, a popular Australian social movement rooted in biophysical science and kept Malthusian

and Darwinian thought strong among Australia's natural scientists, although geography has since tended to fuse its ideas with anti-Malthusian economics.

Griffith Taylor's work also embodied the then widely fashionable eugenicist point of view that has also been described as "Social Darwinism" because of its concepts of human evolutionary hierarchies. Although he advocated allowing Chinese to migrate to Australia (in moderate numbers), he felt that "negroes" should not be admitted. Today of course both these ideas are considered morally repugnant, politically dangerous and beyond the bounds of civilized discussion. In Taylor's day they were rejected on similar grounds, but from a quite opposite perspective. It was Taylor's recommendation that Australia should allow Chinese migration, and his advocacy of mixed marriages between Chinese and European, that led to the ultimate rejection of his ideas at the level of policy makers and of his person at the level of the Press.³³

After WW II eugenics was dropped like a hot potato. Women's rights to birth control slowly came to the fore in Australian population policy debate.

It was not until 1968 [a date coinciding with the release of Ehrlich's *Population Explosion*], that Australia's huge post-War immigration program began to be questioned in the light of its contribution to population growth and environmental impact.

Subsequently, between 1975 and 1994, there were seven national enquiries and reports which purported to or actually did examine the population question within the scientific context of environmental impact. Five were *The National Population Enquiry (Borrie Report) 1975*, which paid lip service only, *The National Population Council Report 1992*, which recommended a population policy; between 1990 and 1992, *The National Greenhouse Response Strategy* and *The National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*, which identified nine elements of a population policy consistent with ecologically sustainable development;³⁴ and *The Ahrlburg Report 1994*, on the foreign aid implications of the economic impact of unrestricted population growth.


The Australian movement, *Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population*, which has a scientifically-based philosophy, was formed in

1988. In 1994 an Australian Academy of Science symposium recommended early population stabilization on ecological, economic and quality of life grounds. The Australian scientific research center, CSIRO, began the "Ecumene project," an internationally-linked population modeling and projection study using environmental and economic data. In that same year Tim Flannery published his Australian best seller, *The Future Eaters*,³⁵ a scientific work on the ecological and economic evolution of Oceanic countries, which advocates a long term goal for Australia of between six and twelve million people.

Also in 1994 the *Australian Population "Carrying Capacity" Report*,³⁶ (the "Jones Report"), was published. More than 90 percent of submissions, including those from Aboriginal organizations, argued against population growth. The enquiry's inspired recommendation was to separate political and administrative responsibility for population and immigration (to avoid contamination with racial issues). Immigration intake should become an *instrument* of population policy, rather than population policy a "long term side effect of *ad hoc* immigration policy."

The (then) Labor government, with Senator Bolkus heading immigration and ethnic affairs (who had promised the ethnic vote to the Prime Minister of the day, by favoring family reunion and a high migration program), could not deal with the "Jones" report. The Chairman of the Enquiry, Barry Jones, was also the national president of the Labor Party. All hell threatened to break loose if the matter was put to parliamentary debate. An election was imminent. In the interests of Labor's return to power it was decided to keep a lid on the issues for fear of losing the ethnic vote. Jones expressed his opinion that the environmental vote would easily compensate for the ethnic vote, but failed to convince the Prime Minister.

In September 1995 the Government published its response to the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development. This reactionary document was the work of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. It was also the Labor government's only reference to the matter of national population policy, which it rejected as too controversial. Other issues raised at Cairo were dealt with in a superficial manner and with only token reference to the environmental connection.

In March 1996 the Labor government was resoundingly voted out of power. In defeat the Labor Party has developed a population policy. But the battle is by no means over yet. 

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NOTES

¹ "If only Malthus, instead of Ricardo, had been the parent stem from which nineteenth-century economics proceeded, what a wiser and richer place the world would be today!" John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Biography*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1933, p.120.

² For instance, Richard Dawkins, Jarrod Diamond, Tim Flannery, the Leakeys, etc.

³ Thomas Malthus, *The Grounds for an Opinion on the Policy of Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn*, London: John Murray, 1815; and Thomas Malthus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent*, London: John Murray, 1815, republished in *Pickering Masters: The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus: Essays in Political Economy*, London: William Pickering, 1986, Vol. 7.

⁴ For Mill's population concerns (which his father shared) see J.S.Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. Ashley, book II, ch.xi, 1848.

⁵ Neville Hicks, *'This Sin and Scandal', Australia's Population Debate 1891-1911*, ANU Press, 1978, pp.95-96.

⁶ Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, Penguin Books, 6th Ed., p.75.

⁷ Robert Heilbroner, *op.cit.*, pp.79-80.

⁸ C.H.Wright, *Conquering the Continent*, Cheshire, Melbourne, p.12.

⁹ Thomas Malthus, *Grounds for an Opinion on the Importation of Foreign Corn*, [Pickering Masters ed.], p.163.

¹⁰ Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath, Quartly, *Creating a Nation, McPhee Gribble*, 1994, p.46.

¹¹ Joseph Banks, *Endeavor Journal*, 1768-1771, "August", p.123, Ed. J.C.Beaglehole, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, August.

¹² Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population and a Summary View of the Principle of Population*, the second essay, entitled, *Summary View of the Principle of Population*, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, London, 1985, p.251.

¹³ Line from the second verse of a famous poem by Dorothea Mckellar, "My Country," revised and

published in her first book, *The Closed Door*, 1911.

¹⁴ Watkin Tench, *1788, Comprising a Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, first published in 1789; this edition edited by Tim Flannery, Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1996, p.102.

¹⁵ Watkin Tench, *op.cit.*, p.119.

¹⁶ Watkin Tench, *op.cit.*, pp.125-6.

¹⁷ Grimshaw, Lake McGrath and Quartly, *op.cit.*, pp.79-81.

¹⁸ Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, Reed Books, 1994, citing Darwin, C.: *The Voyage of the Beagle*, 1845; republication by Edito-Service, S.A., Geneva.

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, ed.1960, vol.23, p.302; and *The Wonders of Life on Earth*, Ed. Life Editors and Lincoln Barnett, Time Inc., New York, 1960, introduction by Sir Julian Huxley.

²⁰ Neville Hicks, *This Sin and Scandal*, pp.95-96.

²¹ W.E.Hearn, *Plutology or the Theory of the Effort to Satisfy Human Wants*, G. Robertson, Melbourne, 1863.

²² La Nauze, *Political Economy in Australia*, MUP, 1949, p.60, citing Hearn's *Plutology*, p.10.

²³ W.E.Hearn, *op.cit.*, p.394.

²⁴ La Nauze, *Political Economy in Australia*, MUP, 1949, p.20, note 16, citing E.Scott, *A History of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne, 1936, pp.204-6.

²⁵ La Nauze, *op.cit.*, pp.204-6.

²⁶ La Nauze, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

²⁷ La Nauze, *op.cit.*, pp.59-65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Personal observation in the Australian population policy movement and J.M.Powell, *Griffith Taylor, Australia Unlimited*, UQP, 1992.

³⁰ T.G.Taylor, 1922, "The Distribution of Future White Settlement," *Geographic Review*, 10[12]:375-402 and T.G. Taylor, 1937, *Environment, Race and Migration*, Toronto UP, Toronto.

³¹ I would be most interested to hear from anyone if he gave rise to any similar movements there.

³² *Australian Population "Carrying Capacity Report" — One Nation, Two Ecologies*, AGP, 1994, p.8. Chaired by Senator Barry Jones, and known herein as the "Jones Report."

³³ J.M.Powell, *Griffith Taylor and Australia Unlimited*, pp.29-30.

³⁴ "Jones Report," *op.cit.*, p.12.

³⁵ Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, Reed Books, 1994. Incidentally, Flannery will occupy the Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University in 1998.

³⁶ "Jones Report," *op.cit.*