
THE SEVENTH
F. OSWALD BARNETT
ORATION

THE COMPASSIONATE EYE:
RESEARCH AND REFORM

by Professor Graeme Davison
Professor of History, Monash University
2000

Oration held at St Johns Southgate,
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The Seventh F. Oswald Barnett Oration

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Monash University, Victoria

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F. OSWALD BARNETT



After a visit to a slum mission, F. Oswald Barnett, a public accountant and a member of the Methodist Church, became involved in the establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home in 1929. In 1934 Barnett formed a study group focused on housing reform, including slum demolition and the establishment of a state financed housing authority. The Barnett Study Group, which included in its membership, G.K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, became the driving force behind a campaign which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1938, on which Barnett served as a Commissioner until 1948.

Then, as now, there is need to campaign against housing poverty and for the renewal of the partnership between the state and the community that is necessary to ensure housing justice.

The F. Oswald Barnett Oration seeks to acknowledge the contribution Barnett made to eliminating poor housing conditions. It also seeks to remind contemporary society that the task is not yet complete - housing poverty remains a social problem of the highest significance. The oration provides an opportunity for the churches and others of goodwill to recognise the significance of the work of F. Oswald Barnett and to renew their commitment to housing justice which ensures appropriate, secure and affordable housing for all Australians.

This oration is jointly sponsored by Ecumenical Housing, (a commission of the Victorian Council of Churches) and UnitingCare Connections.

PROFESSOR GRAEME DAVISON

Graeme Davison grew up in Essendon and was educated at Essendon High School, the University of Melbourne, where he studied History, and at Oxford University where he was a Victorian Rhodes Scholar and studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics. He completed his PhD at the Australian National University and returned to the University of Melbourne where he lectured in History from 1970. Since 1982 he has been Professor of History at Monash University. In 1988-9 he was Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University. He is currently Head of the School of Historical Studies and Deputy-Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Monash University.

His interest in the history of Australian cities began in the early 1960s when he began his own survey of the inner suburbs as part of an honours dissertation on nineteenth century Richmond. His book The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne (1978) was jointly awarded the Ernest Scott Prize for Australian History. His later work in urban history includes studies of The Outcasts of Melbourne (1983), of city-children and urban reform, of suburbanisation and of the history of urban sociology, including Stanley Jevons' pioneering social survey of Sydney. He has been active in community historical and heritage activities, including a period as Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria. His most recent books include The Unforgiving Minute: How Australia Learned to Tell the Time (1993), The Oxford Companion to Australian History (1998) (jointly edited with John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre) and The Use and Abuse of Australian History (2000). He is currently completing a book, entitled Car Wars, on the impact of the motor car on postwar Melbourne.

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THE COMPASSIONATE EYE: RESEARCH AND REFORM

In the early 1930s Oswald Barnett, Methodist layman and city accountant was invited to speak at a mission hall in the notorious inner Melbourne neighbourhood known to contemporaries as 'Little Lon'. He had come to lecture the young men of the district on the evils of cigarette smoking. Barnett was shocked by what he saw. 'There wasn't a pair of shoes or a pair of socks in the whole gathering', he recalled. After he had finished his lecture, the mission sister took him aside. 'Smoking's no trouble to us', she confided. 'Our trouble is I know every child, I know every mother, and practically every mother either keeps a sly grog shop or a house of ill-fame.' 'Well I reeled, I absolutely reeled', Barnett recalled. Returning to his home in suburban Balwyn, he compared the 'comfort and security' of his own young daughters tucked securely in bed with the squalor and neglect of the children of the slums and resolved to do something about it.

Barnett's conversion to the cause of social reform was a highly personal and emotional response to the experience of the slum. In the illuminating interview with Bill Russell from which I draw this account, Barnett is explicit about the ways in which the spectacle of the slum child awakened feelings that went back to his own childhood as the son of an unemployed Brunswick quarryman in the 1890s depression. It challenged his religious faith in the One who declared: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. Barnett is candid, too, about the way in which, as father of a young family, he transferred his paternal instincts to the wider domain of the city. You may also have noticed another implication of his account: that the intimate knowledge of slum life, which he now set out to record and express, was something already vouchsafed to the

silent sisterhood of charity workers, who visited the slum-dwellers in their homes, rather than preaching to them on street corners.¹

Throughout the 1930s Barnett agitated about the evils of the slums. He made the slum issue the subject of his Master of Commerce thesis, later published as a pamphlet, *The Unsuspected Slums*. He enlisted the network of support that he had built for the Methodist Babies' Homes through the Methodist Young Men's Societies to fight the wider cause of slum reform. In 1934 a group of about 40 supporters, known as the Barnett Study Group, began to meet in the late afternoon at Barnett's city office. Like Barnett himself, they were business or professional men - architects, surveyors, lawyers - and stalwarts of suburban Protestantism. My grandfather, Vic Hewett, - a self-educated printer and leader of the North Essendon Methodist Young Men's Bible Class, was one of Barnett's contemporaries and associates. In my mother's family album there is a photograph of a group including Barnett and my grandfather taken at a Methodist Laymen's Missionary Conference in the mid-1930s.

I never met Oswald Barnett myself. But I feel a kind of personal connection through my grandfather and my own Methodist heritage. My copy of Barnett and Burt's *Housing the Australian Nation*, bears my grandfather's bookplate. I have a dim memory, as an eight or ten-year old, of standing with my grandparents among the crowd at a Methodist Babies' Home birthday gathering in Copelen Street, hearing Barnett speak, and marvelling that this wizened little man seemed to command such respect. And I recognise in my own interest in the history of urban social inquiry a distant connection with Barnett's mission to understand 'how the other half lived'.

THE SURVEY TRADITION

The members of the Barnett Study Group were heirs to a century-old tradition of humanitarian social research and reform. We can date its origins back as far as 1819, when the young Scottish minister, Thomas Chalmers, conducted a

pioneering survey of poverty and housing in his working class parish, St John's, in the inner core of Glasgow. Eighteen-nineteen was the year of Peterloo, a moment of crisis, comparable in intensity to 1848, the year of the Communist Manifesto, or 1968, the year of race riots and student protests in Europe and the United States. Glasgow was a city reeling under the impact of rapid industrialisation, the influx of immigrants from Ireland and the Scottish highlands, and the recent de-mobilisation of troops from the Napoleonic Wars. As a young parish minister who had only recently moved from rural Scotland, Chalmers was struck by the desperate poverty of his parishioners and the almost total disintegration of traditional forms of neighbourhood and community support. The more densely people were packed together in the crowded streets and tenements of the city, he reflected, the more isolated and lonely they seemed to be. From the results of his street-by-street survey and his reflections on economics and theology, he wrote a book, *The Christian and Civic Economy of Great Towns* which we might now recognise as the paradigm social survey. In marrying moral reflection, Christian philanthropy and empirical investigation, Chalmers had forged a powerful link between reform and social inquiry.²

Chalmer's example was later followed in other British cities, especially in the industrial north of England, where groups of young middle class men, mainly Unitarians or other Dissenters, formed 'statistical societies' to investigate 'the moral and physical condition of the working classes'. In the 1850s a young Liverpuddlian and Unitarian, Stanley Jevons, imported this tradition to Australia when he carried out a pioneering social survey of Sydney.³ In the 1890s Jevons' cousin, the shipowner Charles Booth, led the most ambitious survey of all, a mammoth twenty-year survey of poverty, housing and religious observance in London. Other surveys were begun in York by the chocolate manufacturer and Quaker Seebohm Rowntree, in Chicago by Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull House, in Pittsburgh by Paul Kellogg, and in the 1920s London by Booth's apprentice, Llewellyn Smith. It was this later London survey that the Barnett Study Group took as their model.⁴

There is a strong family resemblance between these various experiments in social research and action; an affinity of aims, methods, social character and philosophy greater than emulation alone could explain. Let me quickly summarise the leading features of what we might call the survey tradition:

1. *Its religious orientation.* The social survey was inspired by the ethical imperative of Christianity to 'seek and save those who were lost.' Its greatest appeal was to those branches of the church, which adopted a wide social understanding of the gospel. 'The gospel is not only theological, it's not only individual, it's social', Barnett had declared.
2. *Its youthful volunteer character.* In its origins, the social survey was an amateur tradition of social inquiry. It drew heavily upon the idealism of the youthful middle class for whom social inquiry was a process of self-discovery as much as a means of reform. The leader of the survey was often, like Barnett, a charismatic middle-aged person, but the foot soldiers were usually younger men, sometimes women.
3. *Its organic, progressive vision of society.* The social surveyors typically viewed society from the vantage-point of care-takers, seeking to re-integrate the down-trodden and outcast into a society that ideally reflected the reciprocity and mutual affection of the Kingdom of God. They were wary of Marxist and other revolutionary doctrines, as much for their dialectics as for their materialism.
4. *Its confident empiricism.* The social survey was an expression of the nineteenth century faith in the power of numbers. It was through the act of surveillance, Michel Foucault reminds us, that people were constituted as subjects of charity, supervision, treatment or policing. Mapping, counting, naming, classifying are among its standard techniques.
5. *Its pragmatism.* 'A fact is never quite a fact merely because it is investigated and recorded', the American sociologist Robert Park later observed.

'It only becomes a fact in the fullest sense of the term when it is delivered and delivered to the person to whom it makes a difference. This is what the survey seeks to do. It seeks to get and deliver the facts; that is, to publish them in such a way as to get results'.⁵

The history of applied social research in Australia, from the 1930s to the 1970s, is largely the history of the rise and decline of the survey tradition. A quarter of a century further along, we are perhaps in a better position than we were back in the 1970s, to recognise what has been gained, and what lost, in its decline.

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

By the standards of later professional social research, Barnett's methods strike us as primitive. His objectives, in gathering his study group, were in this sense, more pragmatic than scientific. The group initiated a number of surveys of inner city areas, often utilising the help of the female charity workers who carried out door-to-door visits of the 'slums'. They took photographs, measured houses and rooms, devised coloured charts and maps, compiled statistical tables. This was men's work, designed to reduce the female intuitions of the charity workers to the level of verifiable fact. 'To understand the human problem', Barnett wrote in the press article announcing the Study Group's first results, 'it is necessary first to look into the appalling background of slum conditions. This the survey does with the unemotional accuracy of an auditor's report'

*Mission sisters, policewomen, and relief workers have been only too well aware of Melbourne areas that contain 'slum pockets'. No complete statistical record was available, however, and the worker's impressions were unsupported by proof. An economic review of one area was therefore undertaken by social workers equipped with a questionnaire.*⁶

The questionnaire did not elicit much information that the social workers did not already know, but it reinforced their intuitions with the authority of numbers.

In Barnett's mind, the process of investigation was inseparable from the objective of political persuasion. Research, to some extent, was what you did to prove to others what you already knew. Was the 1937 Slum Abolition Inquiry, which he largely wrote, a publicity document or a scientific investigation? Russell asked Barnett. 'It was both', he replied. 'All the work I've ever done I've tried to put on a scientific basis, but with publicity to follow.' A closer examination of his methods, however, would probably show that the publicity often preceded the inquiry and influenced the character as well as the presentation of his findings. (The sensational list of slum landlords appended to the report is a case in point.) His approach to issues of social explanation was unabashedly eclectic: a mixture of physical environmentalism, old-fashioned Methodist moralism and under-consumptionist economics.⁷

Barnett's ally in the anti-slum crusade, Father G. K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, adopted a similarly pragmatic approach to the social survey. Like the American settlement movement, the Brotherhood had appealed strongly to the idealism of Christian youth eager to serve the urban poor, although under Tucker's leadership it assumed the Anglo-Catholic form of monastic order of celibate priests and brothers.⁸ In 1942 Tucker secured the financial support of the Church of England Men's Society for a social survey of conditions among unemployed single men in the slum areas of Melbourne. The objective was not so much to investigate the problem as to provide authority for what Tucker himself already claimed to know. 'Often the church has been pushed aside in matters of social reform because of its lack of authentic first-hand information,' he noted.⁹ 'If I said there was hundreds of people, well, that's rather vague isn't it?...If someone will come and tackle you, you want to know. " Give us some details Father Tucker." But of course I couldn't do it. Until then.'¹⁰

Tucker engaged John ('Jock') Reeves, a final year Economics student at the University of Melbourne and a member of the Student Christian Movement, to carry out the study. He resided for the time being at the Brotherhood's Hostel

in Fitzroy and reported regularly to his Anglican sponsors in the suburbs. Reeves' one-man survey was more significant for what it promised than what it achieved. Underlying the Brotherhood's approach, and distinguishing it from some other ventures in Christian philanthropy, was its 'universal perspective', a belief that 'all aspects of man's life are interdependent' and that social problems must be tackled holistically rather than separately. Reeves' inquiries ranged widely - touching on housing, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, liquor consumption and unemployment - and his approach to questions of social causation, like Barnett's, was eclectic rather than critical. The only publication to issue from the venture, a pamphlet entitled *Housing the Forgotten Tenth* (1944), focused on the intractable issue of the so-called 'problem tenant', the 'sediment of unregenerates, incorrigibles, [and] unemployables' who seemingly resisted all forms of rehabilitation and environmental improvement. How should these social outcasts be redeemed? Were they products of heredity or environment? Would full employment and better housing rehabilitate them, or was a certain amount of 'coercive authority' required? ¹¹ These dilemmas pervaded the thinking of liberal Christians in the late 1930s and 40s. Indeed, one might argue, the unresolved tension between them was what gave the social survey movement both its rationale and its psychological impetus.

ENTER THE PROFESSORS

In his lectures on the Social Survey, Robert Park distinguished between several different styles of social survey: the 'muckraker' or sensational journalist who seeks to rouse public indignation over social evils, the 'expert' who seeks to diagnose and solve them, and the 'investigator' who studies from a strictly scientific point of view. In the early 1940s, when Reeves began his study, the Australian social survey was in transition, as the trained investigators and experts began to assert themselves over the muckrakers.

The war against Hitler, in which democrats made common cause with communists, renewed anxieties about the cohesion of Australian society. The

program for postwar reconstruction launched by the allied governments can be interpreted as a bargain in which the privations of war were compensated by promises of peacetime betterment. In 1941 the Commonwealth government commissioned A. P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, to undertake a survey of civilian morale. It was concerned that, even as the Japanese were threatening Australia's northern frontier, many Australians were apathetic towards the war effort. Recruitment into the armed forces lagged behind requirements and subscriptions to war loans were at barely half the level of the previous world war. Elkin recruited some twenty observers, trained in social anthropology, to make observations, carry out interviews and administer questionnaires about people's attitudes to the war effort, the influence of public media such as radio and newspapers, and the effects of propaganda in both urban and rural New South Wales.¹²

But Elkin saw himself as more than a disinterested spectator of the national psyche; his task, as a kind of pastoral adviser to the government, was to 'diagnose' the cause and prescribe the cure of a national malaise. His survey findings led him to contest the assumption that the Australian people were simply 'apathetic'. Often their apathy disguised feelings of uncertainty, isolation, hostility and disappointment, some of which had been carried over from the depression years. 'What is sometimes interpreted as apathy is a cloaked resentment against the failure of those who said they had built a better world but had not done so.' Some people questioned the claims of liberal democracy to build a better future and expressed yearnings for a 'real leader' who could unify the country. Elkin's analysis both confirmed the seriousness of the situation and the threat of social disintegration. Democracy, he concluded, needed to be made into a social and 'spiritual' as well as a political ideal.¹³

In June 1942, six months after the publication of his survey on morale and six months before the formation of the Ministry of Postwar Reconstruction, Elkin took the lead in forming an Australian Institute of Sociology. The main objects of the institute were:

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- To promote a scientific study of society and its problems and to facilitate the study of sociology and to promote the exchange of information, knowledge and thought on sociological questions.
 - To collect, compile, and correlate data of assistance in reaching conclusions regarding the nature, composition and trends of social life and the problems arising therefrom.¹⁴

In an address to its inaugural meeting Elkin made a plea for social research to be placed on a more professional and scientific footing.

*'The present is a period when we especially need sociological knowledge and the scientific attitudes of calmness and patience. Totalitarian war is causing great changes in our social structure and life as well as in individual attitudes... It is the duty of all social scientists to observe and study the causes of change now and the process of change as the months go by, both because of the scientific opportunity and also because the knowledge so gained may be of inestimable importance in the re-ordering of society in the not far distant future.'*¹⁵

The formation of the Institute marks a watershed in the history of Australian sociology. It divided the era of the muckraker from that of the 'trained social scientist'. It brought sociology out from under the aegis of the churches and charities and placed it under the gaze of the university professor. Instead of ad hoc and unsystematic inquiries it proposed a coordinated assault on the social problems of the day. By 1945 Elkin had formed five committees to conduct surveys of family life, education, religion, medicine and social research.¹⁶ Yet under the scientific forms of an institute, much of the character of the social survey persisted. Elkin, himself an Anglican clergyman, combined the roles of the preacher and the man of science. In his 1943 pamphlet *Changes that Are Upon Us*, he addressed his professional colleagues in language more reminiscent of the pulpit than the lectern: 'Change is upon us; gird your loins ye social scientists, dig deep, and tell us, for our happiness depends thereon.'¹⁷

The leadership of the Institute included liberals and collectivists, theists and secularists. Of the 20 members of its Board in 1943 seven were clergymen, one a liberal rabbi and several of the others, including Richard Boyer and Sam Wadham, the Victorian Vice-President, were prominent churchmen. (Interestingly, neither Barnett nor Tucker was among them). Christian Jollie Smith, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, radical lawyer and founding member of the Communist party, was Treasurer and Lloyd Ross, former union official, newly appointed Director of Public Relations for the Department of Postwar Reconstruction and an outspoken socialist, was a member of the Council. Most of the board positions were occupied by prominent men, most of the secretarial and administrative ones by women.

The foundation of the Institute, according to Elkin's biographer Tigger Wise, exemplifies the energetic self-promotion and empire-building, which she discerns as a dominating feature of his personality.¹⁸ She recognises the undeniable elements of vanity and steely ambition in Elkin's character, and how his priestly preoccupation with issues of social integration subjugated Aboriginal identity.¹⁹ But she fails, I think, to acknowledge his positive influence in overcoming the forces that had so far retarded the growth of sociology and in helping to launch the careers of several promising younger social scientists including Jean Craig (Martin) and a young Methodist minister, Rev. Alan Walker.²⁰

Walker had returned to New South Wales in 1939 after ministering for several years in the United Kingdom where he came under the influence of the two dominating figures in English Methodism, the evangelistic Sangster, and the social gospeller and pacifist Donald Soper. In England Walker's gifts as a preacher had already marked him out as a young man of promise and on his return he had confidently expected appointment to a leading city church, such as the Wesley Central Mission. But the Methodist Conference - perhaps troubled by his pacifism - decided otherwise, sending him instead to the depressed coal mining town of Cessnock. In his recent biography, Don Wright presents this as a time of spiritual crisis when Walker's personal ambitions for service in a larger

sphere contended with his Christian obligation to serve his needy, but often unresponsive, parishioners. For a time he was almost overcome by a 'flood of bitterness and doubt'.²¹ His friend Robert Staines, a board member of Elkin's Institute, suggested that further studies might help advance his professional prospects. He enrolled as an MA student under Elkin's supervision and began work on a social survey of Cessnock, which he later published under the title *Coaltown*.²² He found a community still recovering from the shocks of the depression (Cessnock was the site of the notorious 1929 Rothbury incident when police fired on striking miners), preoccupied with material survival, isolated from other towns, and largely alienated from community institutions, including the church. Like Elkin, whose views on the threat to democracy he shared, Walker saw himself as a kind of social physician reporting on the health of the body politic.

Perhaps the most ambitious social survey of the war years was launched, apparently without Elkin's knowledge or involvement, by a group of Melbourne economists led by a recently-arrived Englishman, Wilfrid Prest. Prest was born in Seebohm Rowntree's York, educated at Leeds University and held appointments in Manchester and St Andrews before being appointed to the University of Melbourne in 1938. Booth's and Rowntree's classic surveys were part of his student culture and during his undergraduate years, as a graduate student and young lecturer the second-generation surveys of Merseyside (1929-31), London (1930-5) and York (1941) also appeared. Arriving in Melbourne he was surprised to find that scientific social surveys were almost unknown (he appears to have known little of Barnett's earlier efforts) and in conversation with his colleagues, the idea of a comprehensive survey of the incomes and housing of the people of Melbourne gradually took shape. By 1942 Prest had secured financial support from the Ministry for Postwar Reconstruction, the University and group of Melbourne businessmen. 'This is the first occasion on which a complete survey has been made of living conditions in any Australian city and we believe that our results will be particularly valuable in planning the new social order that it is hoped to build after the war', Prest explained.²³

Compared with the moralising of Barnett and Tucker, or even with Elkin's scientific probing of civil morale, the Melbourne survey is notable mainly for the rigour of its statistical methods and its austere economic approach. Prest directed the fieldwork program from on high, leaving the actual interviews to a team of young middle class women, mostly recent arts graduates, employed on a piecework basis. Finding their way by train or tram, sometimes through the blackout, to distant and unfamiliar corners of the city, knocking at the doors of strangers, inspecting their bathrooms and backyards, and listening to their complaints about the landlord or their difficulties living on soldier's pay, the interviewers gained vivid, and sometimes unsettling, insights into how the other half lived. It was 'the most impressive political education I ever had in my whole life', Gwynneth Dow recalled.²⁴

The sheer scale of the project, a one-in-thirty survey of Melbourne households, was daunting and the rate of progress, especially in analysing results, was slow. Prest and Donald Cochrane published papers on some facets of the study, but a comprehensive report did not appear until 1952, and then only as a limited circulation monograph. Prest and his colleagues had attempted to lift the art of the social survey to a new plane of scientific rigour, but in purging it of the moralism of the muckraker and the presumption of the expert, they had also lost the sense of urgency which had first inspired the debates over postwar reconstruction.

THE SURVEY IN THE POSTWAR ERA

The war had helped to establish the social survey as almost the standard form of sociological enquiry in Australia. It continued to be a popular form of enquiry both within and outside the academy. At the University of Melbourne, for example, the faculties of Medicine, Architecture and Agriculture, the Department of Social Work and the new Department of Psychology all sponsored social surveys during the 1940s and 1950s.²⁵ Like their predecessors outside the academy, these new social surveys still often drew upon the idealism

of the undergraduates recruited to serve as volunteer interviewers. Doing a survey was often a conscious team-building exercise by new professors eager to develop a common research agenda among their younger staff, to exploit the research funding now gradually becoming available from private foundations, government bodies and the newly formed Social Science Research Council, and, last but not least, to demonstrate the public utility of their discipline.

But the social surveys of the 1950s were markedly different in style and purpose from those of the war years. In his study of public policy debates among postwar intellectuals, *Governing Prosperity*, Nicholas Brown has shown how the Cold War era drew social enquiry away from the social experimentation of the war years and into an increasing preoccupation with issues of social conformity and integration.²⁶ The planners of the 1940s had sought to make a world fit for heroes; those of the 1950s sought to make young Australians fit for the new world. Typical of these later surveys were the studies of social structure and personality in Melbourne and in a rural community carried out by the Psychology Department at the University of Melbourne between 1948 and 1951, and the social survey of adolescents in Sydney begun by the educationalist W. F. Connell and his students in 1951 and published six years later as *Growing Up in an Australian City*.

This shift in perspective can be discerned in the career of Oscar Oeser, leader of the Melbourne study. A South African by birth, Oeser had taken doctorates in Germany and Cambridge, lectured in psychology in St. Andrews and served with the British forces in Germany engaged in de-Nazification before accepting the foundation Chair of Psychology in Melbourne (his wife's home city) in 1946. He had already experimented with the social survey in St Andrews in the late 1930s where, with the financial support of the Pilgrim Trust and the cooperation of colleagues in economics and psychology, he had embarked on a study of the psychology of unemployment among jute workers in Dundee. Oeser himself interviewed the local managers and church leaders, while the

workers themselves were questioned by paid interviewers, usually of working class background themselves. This practice of ‘functional penetration’, as Oeser called it, was designed to minimise the distorting effects of class differences on the interview process; but it also marked a sharp break with the traditions of the older settlement house surveys which were designed specifically to establish a bond of sympathy between rich interviewers and poor subjects.²⁷

In 1949 the Social Sciences Research Council agreed with UNESCO to sponsor two community studies in Australia, one urban and one rural, as part of an international study of ‘communities and social tensions’. With its comparative context, lavish funding and high-level academic support, the study represented a new stage in survey research in Australia. As with earlier social surveys, the psychologists reviewed in turn the economic, family and institutional life of the community, but while their predecessors focused mainly on the adequacy of community facilities, the psychologists were more interested in ‘the individual’s adjustment to his social setting’. The study hypothesised a link between ‘tensions’ within individuals and families at the local level and tensions between communities and nations.²⁸ Becoming more scientific, as the psychologists seemed intent upon doing, meant becoming more abstract, more theoretical, more attuned to international, rather than local, frames of reference. The knowledge they sought was not finally about *this* community, *these* people, but about adolescent socialisation, the roots of anti-Semitism or some other general phenomenon. Surveying *this* community appealed most strongly to those, such as social workers and ministers, who also wanted to change it.

As part of their training, social work students at the University of Melbourne often undertook placements with welfare agencies in the inner city. In 1952 the Department of Social Work invited Bertram Hutchinson, a staff member of the British Social Survey Department, to carry out a state-wide survey of old people.²⁹ A few years later David Scott, Gerard Tucker’s favourite nephew and a former advertising executive, assumed responsibility for the

research and public relations of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and expanded the organisation's research activities. Beginning with modest studies of income support and service provision to low-income families in the inner suburbs, the Brotherhood gradually broadened its research agenda to embrace housing conditions, leisure patterns and more elusive questions of community relations.³⁰ The most notable of these surveys were *Leisure* (1962) a study of people's activities and attitudes in a new suburban Housing Commission estate, written by Scott himself with the social worker and Methodist clergyman Robert U'ren, and *High Living* (1967), a contrasting study of life in one of the Commission's new high-rise housing estates written by a team of social workers Anne Stevenson, Elaine Martin and Judith O'Neill.³¹

Underlying each study, though cautiously expressed, was a concern with the impact of changing urban forms on the quality of family and neighbourhood relations. What effects did the isolation of the new housing estate, or the increased densities of the high-rise estate have on the relations between family member and neighbours? The 'search for community' had been a persistent theme in social surveys from Thomas Chalmers to Elkin and Walker. Postwar planners had seen the building of 'community centres' as an important feature of new suburban estates. But 'community', Scott and U'ren began to recognise, was something that often meant more to the middle class professionals who ministered to it than it did to the locals.³² 'Perhaps some people have over-emphasised the importance of community life and under-estimated the ease with which it can be promoted', they admitted, though reaffirming their conviction that 'active participation in the areas of both family and community life' was important for both individuals and families.³³

By 1967, when *High Living* appeared, the Brotherhood was beginning to reappraise both its mission and its research agenda. From the beginning Tucker had invited agnostics and Jews to participate in its work, while insisting always

on its Christian philosophy and leadership. By the mid-1960s, however, when Peter Hollingworth became its chaplain, he noticed ‘something of a shift in our religious and ideological position.’ The organisation had always recruited people on the basis of their professional skills rather than their beliefs, and sought to maintain a mutually enriching dialogue, but now, Hollingworth believed, ‘we are in danger of losing the necessary balance between the two groups.’³⁴ The issue had been dramatised by the declining attendance at the Brotherhood’s annual Foundation Festival Service but it was also implicit in the energetic internal debates over the Brotherhood’s research agenda. Should the organisation continue to sponsor original research on ‘the quality of people’s lives’ or focus more narrowly on factual research of a more limited kind with a specific policy orientation? The Brotherhood, some argued, was the ‘only organisation with a generalised concern for the quality of people’s lives which arises from its direct experience of palliative service.’ But by now there were other researchers, including members of the new departments of sociology at Monash and LaTrobe, who were better able to take up the broader social research agenda. By the late 1960s the Brotherhood had effectively withdrawn from open-ended social survey research and had decided to concentrate its resources on projects arising directly from its client base and services.³⁵

In deciding to abandon large-scale surveys the Brotherhood was surely influenced by the advent, just a few blocks away at the University of Melbourne, of the largest social survey project in the postwar period, the Henderson Poverty Survey. Ronald Henderson, leader of the Melbourne Poverty Survey of 1966-70, was a latter-day reincarnation of the spirit of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree. Like them, he had been born into a family of wealthy industrialists - the same Dundee jute millers that Oscar Oeser had interviewed in the late 1930s. The Hendersons were devout Presbyterians and Ronald was deeply imbued with the ideals of Christian social duty that had animated other social investigators. As an only child he was educated by a governess, and later - rather unhappily - at a

boarding school. At Cambridge he studied economics, later pursuing graduate studies on the economics of finance markets. By the early 1960s he was a senior fellow of Clare College with good prospects of appointment to a chair in the United Kingdom. But in 1962 he accepted an appointment, as a reader, to direct a new Institute of Applied Economic Research.³⁶

This decision, so surprising at first sight, had both personal and professional dimensions. The Hendersons had strong Australian connections (Ronald's mother and wife were both Australian) and the opportunity to lead a new research institute in a new academic environment was attractive. More surprising, perhaps, in view of his own established academic interests, and the original aims of the Institute, was the decision to undertake a large-scale study of poverty in Australia. One day, it seems, he was walking across the campus with his colleague, John Harper, when he asked: 'What is the equivalent of Rowntree on Poverty in Australia?' 'There was none', Harper replied. 'Then let's start one', said Henderson.³⁷

Henderson was a shy man, not inclined to public expression of his feelings, but the idea of the poverty survey unquestionably touched a deep vein of Christian benevolence, and perhaps even deeper emotional chords, in his personality. Like Booth and Rowntree, he largely paid for the project out of his own pocket - he committed £6000 or more than a year's professorial salary³⁸ - which was only later supplemented with funds from the Nuffield and Myer Foundations. Charles Booth had believed that he had a divine duty to spend his surplus income on good works but not so indiscriminately as to pauperise the poor. Henderson may have responded to some similar deep-seated sense of obligation, a need to somehow compensate those less fortunate than himself.

Compared with earlier surveys, *People in Poverty*, the main report of the Henderson enquiry, impresses by its rigour of its economic analysis. Yet in important ways it remains in the Christian philanthropic tradition that I see as

the underlying rationale of the social survey. In the concluding chapter on domiciliary services the author, Jean McCaughey, herself a fine exemplar of the tradition, reminds the reader of Rowntree's arguments in favour of a community-based welfare system. 'There is growing sense of responsibility for those in need', she continued. A community-based welfare system would 'enable the greatest possible number of individuals to act reciprocally, giving and receiving service for the well-being of the whole community.'³⁹

THE DECLINE OF THE SURVEY TRADITION

By the late 1960s 'community' - the ideal that had sustained the social survey since its inception almost 150 years earlier - was itself now coming under closer sociological scrutiny. As the new departments of sociology sprang up they often looked to their own localities as social laboratories. In 1966, shortly after the establishment of the Monash Department of Anthropology and Sociology, a group of civic leaders, mainly local clergy, social workers and teachers, requested a study of the nearby Housing Commission estate at Doveton on Melbourne's eastern fringe. Two social workers, Lois Bryson and Faith Thompson, embarked on Ph.D. theses on community relations and leadership in the area which became in turn the basis of their joint monograph *An Australian Newtown* (1972). In focusing on the local leaders as well as the led, *An Australian Newtown* marks a further important shift in the development of the social survey. 'Community' - the object sought, often in vain, by so many social surveys - was more a figment of the middle class professionals than a reality for the working class residents. 'It is clear', they wrote, 'that the clergy are not moving in response to public pressure in their efforts to create a community. Rather, their goal of trying to convert a working class population into "a community" summarises the pervasive elements of their approach which makes them external care-takers in the district.'⁴⁰ The sociologists had turned a sharp, sceptical eye on the 'care-

takers' who had commissioned their study, and, in doing so, they had dissolved one of the cherished assumptions of the survey tradition.

This new scepticism towards the caretakers had an inevitable influence upon the caretakers themselves. In the late 1960s the future Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe was appointed Methodist minister in Fitzroy. The old Brunswick Street Methodist Church, just across the street from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, had recently been demolished to make way for the Housing Commission high-rise flats, so Howe found himself in the curious position, not unlike Thomas Chalmers, of being a pastor without a sanctuary and in search of a flock. He had only recently returned from Chicago where he studied at McCormick Theological Seminary, one of the founts of the American settlement movement, and absorbed some of the ideas of community power activists such as Saul Alinski. In 1969 in cooperation with other clergy in the area he founded the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre, as a 'centre for urban research, training and action'. From the outset, the Centre sought to distinguish itself from the 'paternalism' of earlier Christian welfare organisations, and the 'self-justifying rhetoric' of those who pretended to know what was good for others - perhaps an oblique reference to their neighbours across the street. Yet Howe and his colleagues also knew that 'men are not always capable of making their own decisions'; they understood 'the place of the expert in our social structure'. Recognising the need for expertise, and their own desire to effect change, yet not wanting to impose it from above, put the young activists, as they admitted themselves, 'in a seeming bind.'⁴¹ Could they play the role of the expert yet place their expertise at the disposal of others? During the early 1970s the Centre for Urban Research and Action (CURA), as it became known, carried out a number of innovative surveys such as its 1975 study of migrant women in the workforce '*But I wouldn't want my wife to work here*'. But the tensions inherent in the Centre's mission remained, and it was perhaps not surprising that Brian Howe ultimately sought to resolve them through his successive roles as lecturer in sociology and elected politician. CURA was possibly the last incarnation of the survey tradition in Australia.

CONCLUSION

The 1970s was surely one of the great watersheds in Australian intellectual and social history, and the further we get away from that exciting decade, the more decisive it seems to have been. The radical critiques of society which swept through higher education during that decade were generally hostile to liberal traditions like that of the social survey. The ethos of the survey - Christian, amateur, empiricist, pragmatic, sometimes paternalistic was at odds with the mood of the 1970s - secular, academic, utopian, sometimes anarchic. The radicalism of that era was a powerful solvent of traditional institutions and beliefs. One of the casualties was the old-fashioned belief in altruism. By the 1980s we were being told that 'greed is good', but not before the radicals of the 1970s had dismissed the people like Barnett as bourgeois paternalists. It took another twenty years, and the resurgence of economic rationalism, or what we might more accurately call the defence of selfishness, for us to recognise where the liberationist movements of the 1970s had landed us.

'Where are today's Os Barnetts?' Evan Walker asked in the 1995 Barnett Oration.⁴² Most of them, one might answer, were swept away in the 1970s, when the idealism of the young was lost to the churches, and diverted from the cause of social reform into other projects: environmentalism, or perhaps, today, into protests against globalisation, like S11. We may regret that shift, but, despite the influence of latter-day Barnetts like Tim Costello, it is probably wishful thinking to expect its quick return.

Yet while the tradition of social Christianity, which gave birth to the social survey, may have waned, social surveys remain a significant influence on the making of public policy. The terms on which they are carried out, however, are very different from Barnett's day. In the 1930s, groups of men and women, like the Barnett Study Group, were drawn to the social survey as a means of exposing social disadvantage and shattering the complacency of politicians and bureaucrats. In the 1950s and 60s the universities adopted the survey, first

as a means of professional training, later as an instrument in their own ambitious programs of funded research. Since the 1980s, however, the social research agenda has been shaped, increasingly, by government bureaucracies and commercial consultancy firms. As funding from traditional sources like the Australian Research Council's Large Grants shrinks, universities become more dependent upon consultancies and matched funds from industry partners to carry out their own social research. As always it is the piper who sets the tune. As many of you know better than I, the contractual arrangements established by government clients are often restrictive, both of the intellectual independence of the researchers and concerning the publication of results. Barnett, as we have seen, was a pragmatist; his research, too, was carried out according to a clear moral and political agenda. But the agenda was his own, not one imposed upon him from outside, and his fellow researchers gave their time because they wanted to change society, not primarily to pursue a career, please a client or make a dollar.

We badly need a revival of the tradition of independent, voluntary, empirical and morally-purposeful social inquiry in Australia. It is unlikely, in my judgement, that it will come from the universities. They are at the moment too preoccupied with professional and institutional survival, and too dominated by managerial doctrines hostile to such enterprises. It certainly won't come from the consulting firms, government bureaucracies or right-wing think-tanks. I would like to think that it might come from the young; that the yearnings, which now find an outlet in the self-absorption of the New Age and charismatic Christianity, might regain a social dimension. Among my own students I do notice an eagerness to be engaged in learning from life as well as from textbooks that might be harnessed by voluntary agencies for new projects of inquiry and reform. Some of that energy might also come from the babyboomers themselves as they turn, in late middle-age, from personal self-advancement to deeper reflection on the world that they have helped to create and will pass on to their children.

In 1934, we should remind ourselves, Barnett and the forty serious Melburnians who met in his Collins Street office faced a world in some ways even more hostile than our own. There are indeed some uncomfortable similarities between the age of the Premier's Plan and the All for Australia League and the age of economic rationalism and One Nation, though it is surprising how seldom they are noticed. In recalling Barnett's bold experiment, we should not only learn from his shortcomings, but take courage from his success.

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RESPONSE

BY TONY NICHOLSON

Graeme Davison calls for a revival of the tradition of independent, voluntary, empirical and morally purposeful social inquiry – how timely this is.

One of the most detrimental legacies of the 90s has been the tendency of voluntary welfare agencies in Victoria to perceive themselves solely as contractors in a competitive market place. To shape themselves as simply agents of government, competing for contracts to deliver services on behalf of a monopoly purchaser, responding to the need identified by that purchaser and delivering services according to its specifications.

There has appeared an over-willingness of voluntary welfare agencies to adopt the philosophy and methods of the corporate world. This has led to a large scale corporatisation of the sector characterised by large entities with managerial cultures and a loss of focus on purposeful social inquiry.

Despite the entailed rush to develop Mission Statements and Business Plans, there has been a loss of the sense of the agency's mission as being a vehicle for the expression of community altruism in response to the needs of fellow citizens.

Graeme expresses an essentially pessimistic view of a revival of reformist research citing doubts about the interest of academia and the bureaucracies in such work. Critics may claim that he has overlooked or discounted too readily

the extensive social research currently being carried out in the various institutes or within those organisations in the for profit sector.

However, that criticism in turn would overlook Graeme's reflection concerning the link between social inquiry and reform. An approach that featured greater collaboration between those institutes and the voluntary welfare sector could produce the type of fire power that the marriage of moral reflection, Christian philanthropy and empirical investigation did in earlier days.

A significant amount of current research is conducted within for profit consultancies which, even if not overly influenced by an eye on the next contract, is largely short-term, relatively shallow and with a tendency to be influenced by short-term political imperatives or fads and fancies in welfare thinking.

Most importantly, that criticism could in turn over-look the key altruistic attribute that gives such potency to social research and gives the advocate the freedom to pursue his or her mission with zeal. The Oration reminds us of the unique capacity voluntary welfare organisations have to bring the outcome of social inquiry together with strong advocacy and with a high degree of public credibility that is derived from the first-hand experience in service delivery and the database it can generate.

The importance of timeliness of social research is well illustrated. To produce changes in policy direction it requires research reports at the time of the public debate or when policy is under review. Not only in the period reviewed by Graeme but also in the current period, we are familiar with good reports being published well after they have become of historic interest rather than an agent of change.

Of course, the ability to deliver timely research requires the voluntary welfare organisation to adhere to a mission for social change which in turn needs to be reflected in the deployment of resources. One would have thought

that with the advantages of scale seen in the larger corporatised welfare entities the sector would be better placed than ever to deliver on social inquiry. The evidence to date suggests it's not happening.

In referring to Father Tucker's need for a social survey of unemployed single men to provide the authority of hard data to his work, Graeme reminds us of the importance of the quality and robustness of research. It must stand up to critical examination or the enterprise - and maybe the agency - will be discredited.

The importance of this issue has been illustrated recently in the homeless area. In most instances, homelessness can now be seen as a manifestation of gross failure in other major public policy areas. As a consequence, it has been my experience that governments tend to be reluctant to want to understand and come to terms with the extent of homelessness and its key drivers and often seek to deny or, at least, muddy the waters around the evidence. That has been the case over recent years when examining the seemingly high levels of unmet demand for crisis accommodation. When Hanover, The Salvation Army and Society of St Vincent de Paul last year embarked upon research into this matter in Melbourne, the methodology and the rigour with which it was applied was critical to ensuring the robustness of its findings. The best minds within and outside of government have not been able to challenge it successfully. To the Victorian Government's credit those findings are now receiving the attention they demand.

Another issue that is aroused in my mind by the Oration concerns the professionalisation of the homeless sector. The highly desirable introduction of professional standards into this work over the last two decades has been through large scale employment of social work graduates – many of whom seem to lack an appreciation of the importance of gathering evidence and of the techniques of social research and have little idea about reading data.

A serious consequence of this is highlighted in the current review and

debate over the future of the National SAAP Data Collection – a database which for the first time in this country is beginning to give us a good overview of the use of homeless services and the profile and key characteristics of those they assist. Certainly, it can be improved – though not to jeopardize its continuity and comparability. It seems that at this moment its future is up for grabs. Why? Is it because those who would have it reduced to a “simple basic dataset” don’t know how to read the data or don’t understand it? Is it because they don’t like what it says? Or is it a legitimate examination of cost effectiveness? I fear it’s not solely the latter.

We should not overlook the “independent” element in Graeme’s call. All too often these days independence is thought of as being not overly reliant upon the receipt of funds from government. This analysis misses the point. Independence is not determined by the source of one’s financial support – it’s in the mind. The meek will be deterred from upsetting their sponsors whether those sponsors be governments, churches, corporations or the donor-base of generous individuals. For an illustration, we need only to look at the performance of the voluntary welfare agencies in the recent heroin debate in this state. At best, it could be said to be patchy – and at a time when from the bottom to the top of most welfare agencies in Victoria it is known that heroin dependence is a major factor in the predicament of their client group. Independence isn’t about independence from government funding, it’s more about clarity of mission and adherence to it.

I share Graeme’s belief in the value of the moral aspect of our work. For many of us I think it arises from the vision of a better world which may or may not arise from an articulated Christian position, but does have inherent in it many of the tenets of Christianity, indeed all the major religions – love thy neighbour, share your resources, assist the weak, question greed and hypocrisy, be just, believe in a higher power. The challenge is to re-inject this in a world that focuses on different values.

To Graeme's call for a new tradition of independent, voluntary and empirical and morally purposeful social inquiry, I want to add "fearless". For today we are confronting anew those who find comfort in asserting that poverty in its many guises is all to do with personal habits. And those who are promoting the concept of behavioural poverty avoid any challenge to provide evidence or recoil at evidence put before them. Such denial can be cosy.

These are critical issues to be addressed. It is important that voluntary welfare organisations strengthen their knowledge base of people's needs – and ensure they use that capacity to give voice to the clients' concerns and to their clients' understanding of their own circumstances. But they must listen to their clients.

We are greatly indebted to Graeme Davison and this Oration and appreciate his renewal in confidence and the role of non-government voluntary organisations in social inquiry and what they can bring to society. However, I venture we won't get that revival he seeks until we in the voluntary welfare agencies free ourselves of a legacy of the market model and re-assert the role of our organisations as vehicles for the expression of community altruism and, dare I say it, agents of change.

