

ALAN GEORGE LEWERS SHAW

1916-2012



Photo: Courtesy of Peter Yule

PROFESSOR Alan Shaw was one of Australia's most distinguished and prolific historians. Over a long career, he made foundational contributions to the history of colonial Australia, especially of the convict era, of British imperialism and of his own state, Victoria. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and a long-time member of its Council, President of the Academy of the Social Sciences, inaugural President of the Australian Historical Association (1973-4) and a generous benefactor of the National Gallery of Victoria and Trinity College, University of Melbourne.

Alan George Lewers Shaw was born on 3 February 1916, only son of George Shaw, a successful Melbourne solicitor (he was legal advisor to H. V. McKay of Harvester fame), grew up in Toorak, and attended Melbourne Grammar School, where his contemporaries included Manning Clark. After travel in Europe in 1933-4, he studied history at the University of Melbourne under Ernest Scott,

residing at Trinity College. He persuaded his father that, if he obtained first-class honours, he might study in Oxford and become a historian, rather than follow him into the law. Along with his fellow first-class graduates, Manning Clark and Rohan Rivett, Shaw departed for Oxford in 1938, where he read Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Christ Church.

He returned to Australia late in 1940 to find a country in the grip of a prolonged strike on the New South Wales coalfields. The 'ill-informed and unsympathetic' press commentary on the dispute prompted him to investigate the problem himself. Six years later, after studying it economically, historically and sociologically, his monograph *The Australian Coal Industry* (1947) only confirmed its complexity and intractability. Meanwhile, he had been appointed as a lecturer in economics and economic history in the University of Melbourne's Commerce faculty while also working part-time for the Commonwealth Departments of Information, Army and Postwar Reconstruction. His first book *The Economic Development of Australia*, published in 1944, was a lucid synthesis of the work of Shann and Fitzpatrick, framed by issues Shaw addressed more discursively in pamphlets written for the Army Education Services on the future of the British Empire and Economic Controls. On the burning issues—socialism vs. free enterprise; internationalism vs. the Empire—Shaw instinctively sought the sensible middle ground. Education, not ideology, he believed, was the key to progress.

After the war, Shaw moved to the History Department where he taught many of the young historians whose accomplishments gave lustre to Max Crawford's 'Melbourne School'. From 1946 to 1950, he was also Dean of Trinity College. To a complaint about the College's food budget, he famously replied: 'The trouble is not that there's not enough food, but that people eat too much.' In 1950 he returned to England on a Nuffield Scholarship to begin his groundbreaking work on the history of convict transportation. On his return, Shaw took up a senior lectureship at the University of Sydney where he was one of the hardest working members of the History Department, lecturing mainly in British history

and vigorously promoting history teaching in secondary schools. He wrote several well-regarded school textbooks, including *Introduction to Australian History* (1959) and *Modern World History* (1961) and was elected inaugural president of the New South Wales History Teachers' Association.

In the early 1950s Faber commissioned his *The Story of Australia* (1955). The first 'short history' since Hancock's *Australia* (1930), it was, as one reviewer remarked, 'cool, penetrating and judicious' rather than aphoristic and provocative, like Hancock's. Occasionally, however, a more personal perspective came through. 'Socially, the most important feature [of Australia] is the absence of a wealthy leisured ruling class, bred in an aristocratic tradition, attending to public service as well as to private interest', he noted. Even the great pastoral families, whose wealth may have afforded them the opportunity to offer such leadership, had failed to give it. A patrician by birth and temperament, with family links to the squattocracy, Shaw was a paragon of the gentleman-scholar—cultured, disinterested, unmoved by political or intellectual fashion—whose general absence from the Australian social landscape he regretfully observed.

In 1964 Shaw returned to Melbourne as the second professor of history at Monash University. 'It is a surprise to most laymen, and indeed to many academics, when they learn that Mr Shaw is not, as yet a professor', one of his Sydney colleagues noted. He wrote appreciatively of Alan's 'shrewd, genial and precise' teaching, the 'clarity, discernment and moderation' of his scholarship, and his modesty, quiet independence, industry and unfailing good humour. Monash, a brand-new university in a new suburb, was an abrupt change of scene from the collegial environs of Melbourne, Oxford and Sydney. For all its aspirations to modernity, however, it remained, as Geoffrey Serle complained, a bastion of the god-professor, a role Alan filled with his customary modesty, efficiency, and good humour. Among his departmental colleagues, 'Aggle', as he was generally known, was largely oblivious to distinctions of status or gender, referring to everyone, male or female, as 'chaps'.

Coming to Monash was also a Melbourne homecoming. In 1956, after a long bachelorhood, he had married Peggy Perrins, a talented artist who had trained at the National Gallery School under George Bell and in Paris. On their return they purchased a sixteenth-floor flat in Robin Boyd's newly completed Park Towers, overlooking the Royal Botanical Gardens, which would become their home for the rest of their lives.

In 1966 Shaw published *Convicts and the Colonies*, the culmination of fifteen years' research. When he first visited the Tasmanian Archives, the convict era was still a touchy subject and Shaw had to promise not to reveal the names of individual felons for fear of embarrassing their descendants. His revisionist analysis of the character of

convicts ('All in all they were a disreputable lot') had been anticipated by recent works by Lloyd Robson and Manning Clark, but his account of the evolution of the transportation system was, and remains, unsurpassed. 'This is administrative history at its best', was the verdict of one reviewer, noting Shaw's mastery of the imperial and local contexts, measured judgement, urbane style and dry wit.

Among a generation of historical virtuosi, Alan Shaw was a voice of furious moderation, more often roused by the unwarranted certainties of others than a determination to advance ideological views of his own. His polite but uncompromisingly honest review of the first volume of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia* (1962) ('every author inevitably makes mistakes, [but] Professor Clark has made too many for a work of this character') cost him a friendship that went back to his schooldays. In 1966 he was sufficiently 'perturbed' by Geoffrey Blainey's 'arbitrary use of historical evidence' in his revisionist account of the origins of Australian settlement in *The Tyranny of Distance* to make a spirited rebuttal. While recognising the influence of an author's personal experience and values ('what history shows to me it will not necessarily show to others'), he affirmed the importance of accuracy, balance and objectivity as the basis of the historian's craft. 'The PhD should be a training in exactitude, and that alone is important', he insisted.

Shaw was sceptical of the inward-looking nationalism of much Australian historical writing, insisting on the nation's place within what a later generation called 'The British World'. By 1973-4, when he was elected to the Smuts Fellowship in Commonwealth History in Cambridge, he had embarked on a biography of the globe-trotting imperial official Sir George Arthur, architect of the system of secondary punishment in Van Diemen's Land. 'One of the great advantages of a biographical study of such a peripatetic character', he wrote in one of his leave reports, 'is that it is desirable to follow him more or less to the ends of the earth'. With some difficulty he arranged to travel to London by way of Belize, the former British Honduras, only to discover that tidal waves, hurricanes and the tropical climate had destroyed most remnants of Arthur's rule. *Sir George Arthur, Bart, 1784-1854*, a work of meticulous scholarship, appeared in 1980. By following Arthur through his various postings, Shaw delineated an empire unified by networks of patronage, as well as by the expeditionary zeal of the Evangelicals, like Arthur, who shouldered much of the burden of its administration.

With his retirement from Monash in 1981, Shaw entered upon one of the most productive periods of his life. He was a member of the Library Council of Victoria (1976-85), Chairman of the Public Records Advisory Council and President of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria (1987-91). As chairman of the Historical and

Literary Committee of Victoria's 150th anniversary commemorations, he oversaw the writing of a three-volume history, *The Victorians*, a project he adroitly rescued from the parsimony of an incoming Labor administration. A series of lectures, 'Victoria's Heritage', organised under the auspices of the Academies of the Humanities and Social Sciences, was published under his editorship in 1986.

These public commitments reinforced his growing interest in the early history of his own state. After completing an exemplary edition of the correspondence between Governor George Gipps and the Lieutenant-Governor of Port Phillip, Charles Joseph La Trobe (1989) he embarked on a general history of the period, published in his eightieth year as *A History of the Port Phillip District: Victoria Before Separation* (1996). 'It is an old-fashioned narrative history', he admitted. As a 'success story', he feared the book might be 'denigrated' as 'Whig history', yet in a central chapter he unflinchingly dissected its most catastrophic failure, the 'destruction of Aboriginal society'. It was an episode that challenged his forensic skill ('The whole question [of Aboriginal resistance] bristles with difficulties that would surely perplex the combined "grey cells" of Sherlock Holmes, Dr Thorndyke and M. Poirot') and reinforced his growing pessimism about 'human nature'.

The 'optimists of the Enlightenment', he recalled in his 1985 Charles Joseph La Trobe Memorial Lecture, 'had hoped that better education [would] lead to the solution of our ills'. The young Alan Shaw had been among the optimists, but 'with the growing conservatism of age' he had come to a deeper sense of the intractability of human affairs. The historian, he decided, should not only communicate 'an understanding of man's achievements' but of the 'deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil'. Among a generation of historians intent on conceptual

innovation, he was a methodological, although not a political, conservative. (Since the 1940s, he had usually voted Labor). But history, as he saw it, was a broad church, and he encouraged students and younger colleagues into fields and approaches far from his own.

To his wide circle of friends and colleagues, Alan seemed an almost ageless figure. The photograph he presented with his application for the Monash chair—lean, erect, bespectacled and balding—could have served him for the next forty years. Without seeming the least egotistical, he exuded a patrician confidence of judgement, detachment and devotion to public duty that often singled him out for leadership. He lectured, presided, attended committees, wrote journal articles and played golf well into his eighties, and was still lecturing to U3A groups and playing bridge into his nineties. With Peggy, he travelled widely, especially to visit opera houses and music festivals in Europe. Together they were generous benefactors to several state institutions, including the National Gallery of Victoria, where they endowed the Shaw Research Library of over 50,000 volumes, the State Library, where they created the AGL Shaw Summer Research Fellowships, and Trinity College, University of Melbourne where his many gifts included the Alan and Peggy Shaw Scholarship for study at Oxford University.

Alan Shaw died at his home in South Yarra on 5 April 2012, aged 96. Peggy, his wife of more than fifty years, predeceased him in 2009. Among many other honours, he was made an Officer in the Order of Australia in 1982 for services to education.

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Peter Yule who permitted me to draw on a longer version of his obituary published in the *Melbourne Age*.

- GRAEME DAVISON